

THE FIRE TREE

CHAPTER 4

Janine kept her eyes firmly shut and tried to control her breathing. She knew, from experience, that – when the danger had passed – her anonymous rescuer would have gone.

She took a deep breath and slowly opened her eyes. Everything was deserted. There were no people, no animals and no birds. The forest was unnervingly silent.

She shook her head, as if to dislodge the remnants of confusion, and wondered if she had been knocked out. She felt her head but could find no tender spot that might indicate a blow. Struggling to bring her thoughts into coherent focus, she vaguely recalled a man about to attack her. From that point, her memory was blank.

Janine cautiously stepped forward and searched for any signs of any struggle and conflict that might have occurred.

A little way to her right, she could see a pair of feet sticking out from under some vegetation. She shivered, involuntarily. Terrified of what she might find, but – nonetheless – overwhelmed by curiosity, she approached the motionless feet and kicked them. There was no response. Tentatively, she swung her foot at the low branches of the dense greenery surrounding the spot. In reply, the thick stems of the bushes swayed back and forth. As they moved, they alternately hid and revealed the horrifically wounded and bloodied head of what was, obviously, a lifeless corpse. The eyes were wide open and stared vacantly upwards, an expression of shock and terror permanently frozen into them. Janine shuddered, again, and backed away.

She fought to quell her dismay at not being able to express her gratitude to her rescuer in person. This had not been their first intervention. She hoped that, one day, she would be able to catch him and thank him. She was sure that it **was** a 'him' because clearly – judging by how they were able to deal with an opponent, they must be as strong as an ox.

She looked around, in all directions, to ensure that she wasn't being watched, and then - gathering her wits - began to make her way back onto the forest trail and hurriedly set off along it.

She scanned this way and that, for any sign of her benefactor, but she knew that - whenever he had helped her out in the past - he would always be well clear before she recovered her composure. She wondered if he tracked her, for a while, to make sure that she remained safe. She also wondered if he had followed her, on a regular basis, since he had a habit of turning up at the most opportune moments.

As she walked, she said a little prayer. A few words of gratitude to God and to fate for her salvation and a formal thankyou to whoever had intervened for her. She was blessed, for sure, with her own personal guardian angel.

She suddenly became aware of a pain in the palm of her hand. Looking down at it, she found a wound at its centre, slowly welling blood. Ripping some fabric from the length of rough spun cotton she had had draped over her shoulders as a makeshift shawl, she wrapped it around her hand to stem the blood.

Her pace immediately slowed as her face contorted in thought. She had hurt her hand. When had she done this? She dimly recalled something about it, but it was like trying to grasp a wisp of smoke and the inspiration slipped away from her.

A wave of desperation overtook her as, without meaning to, her mind began to assess her situation. Early that morning, she had run away from her employer, taking with her a pillow case stuffed with her meagre possessions. A pillow case that she had hung in a bush, by the roadside, while she had used a nearby dip in the ground as a makeshift toilet. It was when she had come back onto the road that she had come across the three men. Her heart lurched and her pulse raced at the recollection of the event.

If she were lucky, the pillow case might still be where she had left it. It wasn't directly visible from the road to anyone passing by, so it could still be safe. The thought of going back there filled her with dread, but – having no other option – she took a deep breath and cut right towards a path that would intercept the road.

She had set off on her journey, that morning, in the back of a hay wagon, along with the cook's lad, who was also running away. Unfortunately, a guard had spotted him sticking his head out, one too many times, just a hundred yards from the gate. He had been dragged out and, from the subsequent screeching and cries of pain, had very likely lost an ear for his trouble.

Once they were safely a good distance away, the driver had invited her to sit up front with him. The driver, as it turned out, had wandering hands and he found difficult to keep them to himself. She had soon been thrown off the wagon, and left to walk, after rejecting his repeated advances.

She had realised, immediately, the dangers of being alone on the road and had very nearly turned around. The likelihood of being discovered while sneaking back into the house, however, had horrified her. She had been beaten, all too often, for no apparent transgression. She hardly dared imagine what she might have had to endure if she had given them an actual reason!

With great trepidation she made her way back to the bush and, after the best part of an hour - and after mistaking the wrong location, once or twice - she found her pillow case. She was grateful that it was exactly as she had left it. She was also grateful that it had not rained. She appreciated, now, that she should have wrapped her oiled coat around the pillow case rather than rolling it up and putting it inside, but she hadn't – at the time - been expecting to have to abandon it.

She resumed her journey with a new and more pressing awareness of her vulnerability and with a great deal more haste. She knew full well that the Rangers, known by many as the "Watch", despite being charged with keeping some sort of rudimentary law and order, were as much a threat to her safety as protectors of it. Some of the Rangers, it was known, could be found taking advantage of their status to commit acts of robbery, extortion and rape of their own. The tax they were permitted to gather, to sustain themselves, was often unduly inflated and was frequently extracted at the point of a sword or at the end of a pistol barrel. Fingers trembling, she took off her mother's ring and slipped into a hidden pocket in the band of her skirt.

She had been walking for an hour and a half, quickly getting clear of the road and hiding, both times she heard riders coming, when she became aware of the sound of a wheeled vehicle heading her way from behind. She made her way rapidly off into the trees and bushes and hid.

Presently, a small coach came into view, pulled by not one but two horses, both of which looked in far better condition than most found in these parts. The driver and his companion were well dressed and wore something approaching a uniform. Each was armed with both a musket and a pistol; all four weapons being set prominently on display. In addition, a pair of tall pike staffs were attached, like flag poles, to either side of the coach body at the front. Rippling from their tops, below the blades, were long purple banners bearing a white cross.

Janine breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of these banners. This, she recognised, was the conveyance of a bishop or a very highly placed priest.

She moved out from the cover of the greenery and stood at the roadside as the carriage came closer. One of the coachmen leaned to the side, turning his head, and clearly called something to the occupants. A head appeared, briefly, from a window and – after a shouted exchange – it popped back in again. She could hear neither the question, nor the answer, but the tone of both parties sounded amiable.

At ten paces from her, the driver called to the horses: "Whoa!" and they obligingly came to a halt, stopping no more than an arm's length from where she stood. Having travelled to Edinburgh, several times, with her mistress – one of the privileges of a personal maid – Janine knew that these horses were well trained and that they were used to town work, where distances and positioning were essential for safe and comfortable travel.

"A bheil feum agad air cuideachadh?", asked the driver, in a mediocre Gaelic approximation of "Do you need help?".

"I would be most grateful for your help, Sir.", she replied in perfectly enunciated English, "I have been chased by some men who meant me harm. I lost my travelling companion and I find myself in a terrible situation."

"Where are you heading?", asked the driver.

"Anywhere that isn't here, if you please!", she replied.

At this, there was a snort of laughter from inside the coach: "That is the story of my life!", a man's voice called to her, followed by the noise of him slapping his leg in merriment.

She reached out to the horse. The horse ignored her, remaining studiously aloof.

"You don't exist until I tell him it's okay.", the driver told her.

After a slight pause, the driver spoke to the horse: "Stand easy."

The horse gave a soft neigh and seemed to visibly relax. It turned to her, the big intelligent eyes studying her for a moment before the big muzzle gently snuffled at her and nudged her approvingly. The horse sniffed the neck of the pillowcase she held and then look directly into her eyes, with an unmistakable twinkle in them. Janine smiled and reached into her makeshift sack and withdrew an apple. She placed it on the palm of her hand and offered it to the horse. With infinite care and slow, calculated precision, the creature took the apple in its mouth, but did not chew. The other horse looked across at Janine, quizzically, and then – after a few moments - nudged the first horse lightly on the nose. The first horse began to chew, reluctantly. Janine quickly produced a second apple and, leaning across, gave it to the far horse. They both ate, now, happy that neither was neglected in the feast.

The driver gave a little chortle and said: "They are almost welded, one to the other. They can't abide that one might have what the other does not. You're lucky that he didn't spit that apple out and stomp in two with his hoof so that the other could share it!"

"They like you," said the man from within the carriage, hanging his head out of the window, "And horses are a good judge of people."

"I'm glad I meet their approval", replied Janine, with a chuckle.

There was a click and the door to the carriage opened, ajar, and the occupant leaned out. "Is there somewhere we could take you?", he enquired, arching an eyebrow.

"I believe that there is an inn, a few miles ahead," she said, "I was making my way there, before..." She shrugged her shoulders, almost apologetically, and left the sentence unfinished. The man nodded, solemnly, "Before your incident", he offered. Janine nodded, her bottom lip beginning to tremble.

The man jumped down, landing with unexpected grace for a man she guessed to be in his early forties. Janine opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. The man held up his hand, happy to do without an explanation in light of her clear distress.

His eyes took in the rips in her dress, the blood still caked on her leg and the tears smudged on her cheeks and immediately looked sad. His hair, neatly

tied behind his head, was a dark brown with highlights of copper and red and a few random strands of grey.

Seeing his fine shiny boots, elegant white shirt and waistcoat, and the silk handkerchief protruding from his breast pocket, Janine quickly dropped into a curtsy. Her eyes then alighted upon the stiff purple collar, hung open and loose, around his neck and she added: "Your Holiness."

The man smiled a smile that hovered on the brink of laughter: "That's a little formal, for me, Mistress. I am to be consecrated Bishop in Brechin, in a few weeks, but – for now – I am a humble priest!"

A voice rang out from inside the coach: "Though happy and content to ride in a fine carriage to keep his humbleness under strict control!"

"Pay no attention to my brother," he told her, "He is jealous that I inherited the lion's share of both looks and brains in our family!"

This reply was met with roars of laughter from within.

With a deft nudge of his toe, the man dropped the folding step of the vehicle and then, flailing his arm with absurd exaggeration of manners, bowed deeply to her and said: "Madam, our transport is at your disposal".

Janine took the hand he offered her and allowed him to help her up and into the carriage.