

THE FIRE TREE

CHAPTER 7

Janine stepped up into the coach, having accepted the priest's hand to help her, and lowered herself into the middle of the seat across from its current occupant. The priest climbed in behind her. Reaching for the door, he paused to shout to the driver to continue their journey, then pulled it closed. He sank into the seat next to the other man.

Janine stared at the two men, open mouthed, her eyes furiously flitting between them, her face a perfect picture of confusion. They both laughed, good humouredly, revelling in her consternation.

"I am Brian.", said the priest.

"I am Bruce.", said the other.

"We are identical twins," Brian announced.

"But," Bruce chirped, "Only one of us is a priest."

"As far as we know!", Brian chortled. This seemed to thoroughly amuse them both and they subsided into gales of laughter. Janine found herself laughing, too, and this only seemed to encourage their mirth!

"Of course," the priest, declared, "It maybe **he** who is the priest and I just put on the wrong clothes this morning!" This was a cue for more laughter and Janine could not stop herself from joining in.

"He is the thin one!", the priest offered.

"And he is the fat one!", his brother retorted.

The two men, of identical girth and stature, both adopted mock frowns and scratched their chins, simultaneously, in feigned concentration.

"Of course," the priest admitted, "It **could** be the other way around and I am simply confused!"

The two brothers chuckled at each other's wit, looking down and shaking their heads in a parody of exasperation. Janine was shocked at how their mannerisms were every bit as identical as their appearances. She found this both fascinating and, at the same time, somewhat eerie and disturbing!

They caught sight of her look of bewilderment at the same time and, once again, dissolved into fits of laughter. Janine tried to suppress a chuckle but, after a few moments, was forced to abandon any attempt at composure.

Bruce leaned forward to her, confidingly, and – gesturing towards his brother – said: "I am weary of the number of times, while we were growing up,

that a female guest or acquaintance would march up to me and cuff the back of my head or, even, slap my face for some crude and over affectionate move on my brother's part, clearly thinking that **I** were **he!**"

"That stopped when I became a priest.", the other protested, then – in response to his brother's reproachful look – added, in wounded tones: "Didn't it?"

This provoked another mutual bout of sniggering and chuckling to which Janine, again, succumbed.

"The servants were continually getting our names the wrong way around," Bruce told her, "Until I came up with a solution!"

Brian gave his twin a withering look.

"Brian was somewhat godlier and more religiously inclined than me from a young age and always looked a lot saintlier!", Bruce explained, prompting more chortles, "So I told everyone to remember that "Brian" was "spy'en" – making sure it sounded like it rhymes - for the Lord, checking that we were all being good! That seemed to do the trick!"

After the joviality had subsided, Brian slid forward and spoke in hushed, secretive tones: "I am the fortunate one," he told her, giving the other a look of mournful pity, "For I managed to hold on to my sanity and a full grip on my mind." He contorted his lips in an anguished smile, glancing, for a moment, to his companion. Then, tapping his temple with a finger, he added: "Our mother was grief struck and broken hearted over my brother's tragic mental condition." He sighed deeply, gulping in apparent sorrow and gave a pathetic snuffle. He seemed to be on the verge of tears.

Janine's embarrassment was plain and her face quickly changed to a sombre and melancholy expression. She turned to the window, composing herself, before turning back to express her sympathy. She had only just opened her mouth to speak, when there was a sudden shriek of laughter from the other man, who threw back his head and guffawed loudly. Janine watched, helplessly, as he slapped his knee, repeatedly, in delight. Brian, meanwhile, snorted, clapped his hands together and began gleefully drumming his fists on his knees.

It took only a second more before Janine realised that they had been teasing her. She began to giggle. Before long, she had joined them in uncontrollable laughter. The two brothers were now sprawled half on and half off their seats, flailing their legs, holding their sides while they chortled and snickered until tears streamed down their faces.

After a good while, all three of them were able to resume a more or less respectable demeanour. Brian and Bruce were still breathing heavily from the exertion of the previous ten minutes while Janine had just surfaced from a final bout of silent laughter, her stomach and chest shaking as she suppressed any sound.

"This reminds me," Brian announced, straightening his clerical collar, "Of when we were children and our disgraced Uncle would visit and have us kicking and screaming on the floor with laughter at his stories!"

Bruce nodded, enthusiastically, with a huge smile on his face.

"Your **disgraced** Uncle?", Janine asked.

The two brothers straightened in exaggerated solemnity, and Bruce placed his finger vertically over his lips, imploring her to secrecy, as he said, gravely: "He ran away to sea!"

Brian shuddered and looked utterly appalled, before exclaiming: "The shame!"

The two laughed and Janine was relieved that, this time, it didn't incapacitate them!

Brian, putting a hand on his brother's elbow to urge his silence, cleared his throat, before launching into ludicrous mimicry of what Janine took to be their mother's voice: "You are a bad influence on your nephews! You are disgusting, disgraceful and vulgar!"

Bruce could not resist joining in, employing similar whining tones: "You are a blot on your family's character!"

Janine giggled, covering her mouth with her hand.

The three sat in comfortable and easy silence for a while, the coach swaying and bumping over uneven sections of the road. Eventually, the brothers decided that it was time to talk, again.

"Where are you bound....", the priest asked, twirling an index finger in the air, as if cranking the bucket of a well, to show he didn't know her name.

"Janine.", she offered, obligingly.

"Where are you bound, Janine?", he asked, appending her name to his question.

"I.... I....", she stammered, "I need to get away."

"You're on the run?!!", gasped Bruce in theatrical astonishment.

"No!", Janine objected, then shook her head, perplexed, "I wouldn't say that. Well, not exactly...."

The two brothers, almost completely synchronised in their movement, grabbed their chins, craned forward and looked at her with expressions of complete captivation on their faces, appearing – for all the world – like a pair of dullards.

"Do go on!", implored Brian, in tones of incredulity.

"Do accept my apologies for my brother's intrusiveness!", gasped Bruce, mortified that a priest should be so nose-y.

Brian, keeping his eyes fixed on Janine, flapped his hand in the air towards Bruce. With a farcical pretence at absent mindedness, he tapped and flicked at the other's face, as if he were a busy and impatient parent warding off an over enthusiastic child.

Janine could not suppress her amusement at these antics. She was completely enthralled by the buffoonery of these two men!

"You have us," began Brian, "In the palm of your hand!"

Bruce scoffed in derision: "**You** have my **face** in the palm of **your** hand!", he protested.

Brian pulled back his hand - as if he'd placed it on a pile of horse manure - and made play of wiping it on his cloak. The both chortled, loudly.

Janine, feeling inexplicably relaxed and at ease in the company of these two, thrust her hands indignantly on to her hips, huffed imperiously and made a displeased face at the pair.

They froze, dramatically, and feigned discomfort, both looking thoroughly abashed. Casting their gaze downwards, they stuck out their bottom lips, as if sulking.

"I was at Orchy Manor," Janine began, "I was a maid to the Lady, there."

"You have a fine and noble face for a maid.", Bruce interjected.

"Thank you," she replied. Then, after a pause, she added: "It was the way God made me."

"Just so!", exclaimed the priest, reprimanding his brother with a stern look.

Bruce fluttered his hand, dismissively, "Go on.", he urged.

"The Laird and Lady were kind to me and treated me well," Janine attested, "But the Laird's Chief of Arms started to cause me problems with the attention he began to pay me." She blushed and bit her lip.

Brian arched an eyebrow, then inclined his head, solicitously, encouraging her to continue.

"I made it clear to him that his advances were unwelcome," Janine advised, "But he became more and more insistent."

The two brothers nodded, sympathetically.

"I told him that he had to stop and that, if he didn't, I would be forced to tell her Ladyship about what he was doing. He touched me..." Janine grimaced in disgust, "in private places, through my clothes."

Suddenly Bruce gasped and threw his hands up to grasp his head. Reaching out, he shook his brother's shoulder to draw his attention. "Orchy Manor!", he cried, "Wasn't that where a man was murdered, last week!"

Janine looked immediately sheepish and lowered her eyes. Her face had gone extremely pale. Her look of anguish prompted the two men to exchange agitated glances.

"Yes.", she replied, dully.

The brothers both shivered, involuntarily.

"The Chief of Arms flew into a rage and he attacked me," she sobbed, "He grabbed me by the throat and pushed me against the wall, striking my head against it. Then he pulled out a knife!" Tears flooded, unbidden, to her eyes as she spoke, "He said he was going to kill me! He said that he would dump my body in the woods and make it look like I had been robbed."

Janine began to tremble and couldn't stop herself from sobbing.

"You're safe, now.", the priest assured her. Timing his move to the jostling and swaying off the coach, he clambered across to the seat beside her, took both her hands in his own and kissed them. "You're safe, now.", he repeated.

"He told me to get my cloak, then started dragging me to the door!", Janine said, putting her head on his shoulder and burying her face in his scarf, "He said that he would see to it that my "attacker" had raped me, repeatedly!"

Janine's chest heaved as she wept. She gasped and choked on her words as she tried to speak, again. The priest made soft "hushing" noises as he patted her back and whispered words of consolation in her ear.

At least two minutes passed before anybody spoke, then Bruce, sat across from them, ventured a question in hushed tones: "How did you escape?".

"I don't know," she replied, becoming nervous and distracted, "He took me down the back steps. He was pulling and pushing me all the way. We passed the first floor that leads into the rooms behind the kitchen. We continued down and passed the floor for the store rooms, then he kicked me down the short run of steps to the cellars." She paused to sob and swallowed hard, before continuing, "He raced after me and stepped over me. He grabbed me by my hair and dragged me into the cellars. He threw me on top of some sacks, then turned me over. He pulled my cloak away and lifted my dress." She sobbed, again, her face contorted in anguish at the memory, "He said that if I screamed he would kill me slowly and painfully and that he would make sure that I suffered. He said if I were quiet, he would make it a quick and easy death for me. I told him that I wouldn't say

anything if he let me go. I promised I wouldn't say a word to anybody, but he said he couldn't trust me and that it had to be this way."

Bruce hugged her and rocked her gently until she was sufficiently recovered to be able to speak, again.

"He took out a knife and he put it to my throat. He pulled up my underclothes." She flinched at the memory. "He told me to keep quiet. Then..." She fell silent, a look of confusion overtaking her. She screwed up her face, straining to recall the events. She looked troubled, then – after a few moments – she shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know what happened," she continued, "I must have fainted. That's what it must be. I came around sat up against the wall. My clothes were all straightened out." She hesitated and furrowed her brow, deep in thought. "He must have been interrupted. He hadn't touched me. He hadn't done anything..... shameful to me. I was still..." she blushed crimson, "I was still... pure."

Bruce leaned over and patted her hand, gently, while Brian made soothing noises. She choked back a sob. With a sniff, she resumed her story.

"He wasn't there. I looked around, but I was frightened and I didn't dare stay down there. So, I went back upstairs. I took off my cloak and washed my face. I laid down on my bed. A little while later, there were shouts and I could hear running feet and a lot of activity. I heard some men speaking, passing my door, and one told the other that the Chief of Arms had been found dead, in the cellar. They said he had been stabbed, with his own knife,

Janine sniffled and whimpered, then drew in a deep breath. Brian, manoeuvring her slightly to one side, reached into his pocket. A moment later, he produced a handkerchief, which he handed to her. Janine wiped her eyes and her cheeks but then stopped, holding the handkerchief in front of her, looking at it uncertainly. Brian gave the tiniest, good natured snort and smiled. He nodded to her, encouragingly, but she still looked hesitant. Brian brought his hands up to his face, cupping his nose between them, then inclined his head into them in a gesture of blowing his nose. Janine looked wistfully at the handkerchief – it was beautiful – then raised it to her face and blew her nose, all the time looking at Brian apologetically.

"Your gracious manners are at odds with your humble status.", observed Bruce, from the seat opposite.

Janine looked at him guardedly and then shook her head. There was deep sadness in her eyes. She looked out of the window, her gaze distant and meditative, as if she no longer saw them. She sighed a deep, long sigh. The brothers traded glances. There was a sudden air of gloom about this girl.

The two brothers sat still and waited patiently. A full minute passed. Janine continued to stare out of the window.

Brian noticed that Bruce's expression had changed. His look of sympathy had slowly become one of fascination. The fasciation now gradually

transformed into astonishment. His brother looked across to him, briefly, but quickly returned his attention to the girl. The other's look was intense, completely spellbound.

Brian looked back and forth between the two of them and suddenly started in surprise. He had caught, for a split second, a flash of yellow and orange in the corner of his vision. He flicked his eyes, to and fro, between them, again, and – for a fleeting moment – he saw it again. It was gone in an instant.

The coach suddenly slowed. The priest knew this action would usually be followed by a lurch as the vehicle negotiated a particularly bad pot hole. He took advantage by gently lifting himself from his seat and depositing himself next to his twin. The girl's gaze never shifted.

From this vantage point Brian could now see what absorbed his brother with such bafflement. Dappling and waving across the wall of the coach, behind her, was the reflection of flames. They lit her face, too, with a swirl of colours. The effect clearly emanated from something substantial, outside, that was alight. That, he told himself, was absurd. The pattern was constant, so they were not passing the source of the conflagration. Rather, it appeared to be keeping pace with them!

Brian looked through the window of the coach. There was nothing there that could possibly account for what they were seeing, there was just the greenery of trees, bushes and shrubs. He looked back at the girl. It was still there. Yellows, oranges and reds glimmering and wavering. Brian looked, alternately, through the window and at the girl. The source of the flames was invisible, but their effect was distinct and unmistakable!

The two brothers turned to look at each other. The look, now common to both their faces, was one of incredulity.

Brian, almost reading Bruce's thoughts, asked himself if this were something evil they were witnessing. Were these the fires of damnation? Instantly, they both thought the same thing: These were good flames. Their effect was not to inspire a feeling of panic, but a feeling of reassurance. Brian and Bruce's eyes met for a moment and they conferred, wordlessly, and agreed that this was something altogether wonderful.

Slowly, and with exquisite care, Brian extended his hand and very gently placed it on the girl's arm. She turned towards them. Her eyes didn't so much as waver. The girl's countenance did not change. She looked straight through them. It was as if she were in a trance.

Bruce and Brian held their breaths, both taken aback and completely dumbfounded by the astonishing event they were witnessing. The coach abruptly lurched, at which point the girl suddenly sprang back to attention. At that precise moment, the flames stopped. She looked at the brothers, quickly from one to the other, in a state of anxiety.

"I'm sorry!", she said, "I don't know what happened. I just...."

"It's okay," replied Bruce, "That's no problem. You....." Bruce faltered as he felt his brother urgently squeeze his leg. The brothers exchanged a fleeting glance and Bruce continued: "That's no problem, you were just deep in thought for a moment, that's all."

They both smiled, broadly, and – after a moment of indecision – Janine smiled back, a look of relief flooding across her face.