

THE FIRE TREE

CHAPTER 10

The wheels of the coach suddenly clattered loudly as they reached the driveway up to Brech Woerlach Hall and Janine woke with a start. The approach to the Hall was cobbled – or perhaps, more accurately “tiled” – with tens of thousands of little square stones in every shade of the rainbow.

Janine put her head out of the coach window and gasped at the sight that greeted her. A huge formal residence, built of gleaming white stone, jutted skywards. It was constructed with two main floors and was profound in its tallness and elegance. The clusters of tall chimneys – regularly spaced across the roof – seemed to be reaching for the clouds. Along the bottom of this impressive building she could see there was a basement running its entire length and attic rooms, across the top, similarly running from one end to the other.

Her face was creased with concern as she racked her mind to explain why this impressive and imposing place was both strangely new and disconcerting and yet hauntingly familiar.

Janine withdrew her head and looked to her fellow travellers, both of whom sat with smiling faces that radiated an aura of pride and self-congratulation. Grateful for her earlier rescue from the roadside, she obligingly assumed a manner of reverential awe.

“This is like a palace!”, Janine gasped, “Its huge!”

This seemed to please them greatly and they beamed with satisfaction.

“This is the seat of the Earl of Bo’ness,” Bruce explained, casting his arm towards the carriage window, “And we were privileged to grow up, here, in the care of our Uncle.”

“Our father was taken prisoner by the Spanish, when we were young, and died in captivity.”, Brian offered.

“I’m sorry to hear that.”, Janine told them, sincerely. The two nodded solemnly in acknowledgement.

“Our father was an adventurer!”, Bruce announced.

“Our father,” replied Brian, tersely, “Was unable to contain his dreams or keep his big ideas under control.”

Bruce glanced coldly at his brother.

“Our father had embarked on an expedition to explore new territories, for the crown, when his vessel was taken by a Spanish Man of War.” Bruce explained, proudly, “This incident occurred at an awkward moment in history....”

Bruce looked to his brother for support, but Brian was looking upwards, making a fine pretence of being completely fascinated by the swirling patterns in the stained wood. Bruce shrugged, regarding his brother contemptuously.

"Negotiations with the Spanish were extremely protracted," Bruce clarified, "But were...."

"Completely and utterly fruitless!", Brian interrupted.

Bruce clenched his fists and his teeth. Brian smirked, nose still pointing aloft.

"I am sure that your mother must have been distraught!", Janine told them.

Bruce looked to his twin and said, pointedly: "She was beside herself with grief."

Brian tore his attention away from the woodwork and looked genuinely sorrowful. He nodded his agreement and added: "She was, indeed."

The two exchanged a brief, conciliatory look that extinguished their hostility with a suddenness equivalent to the pricking of a balloon.

"You must have felt like princes, growing up here!", Janine exclaimed, trying to soothe the atmosphere still further.

"We were very lucky, indeed!", Bruce agreed.

"We were extremely fortunate!", said Brian.

"How were you ever able to explore this huge palace of a house?"

"It was a challenge, for sure, but we had all the time in the world – or so it seemed – with Springs, Summers and Autumns that seemed to go on forever in our little lives, bereft of responsibility or accountability.", Bruce confessed.

"Our mother, aunt, uncle and all the servants were glad for the peace and quiet whenever we were wandering and exploring.", Brian explained, "We were...", He paused, groping for the right words, "...a handful for all concerned!". They both laughed.

"Our Governess was exceptional!", Bruce enthused, "And always said 'Children come this way but only the once, so we should litter their pathways with valuable experiences'"

At the word "Governess", Janine's eyes popped wider and the two brothers didn't fail to pick up on this tiny prompt. Bruce looked duly embarrassed and Brian made an apologetic little smile as his shoulders slumped ever so slightly.

At this moment, the coach pulled to a halt and the two male occupants demurred to Janine to alight first. One of the servants, dressed in stunning red,

yellow and gold livery, opened the door for her, placing a set of steps on the ground and bowed deeply and formally. She had been a servant – she was a servant – and knew, immediately, that these servants were something special. These servants were used to excellence. Service, for this class of servant, was an intensely honourable and distinguished calling worthy of their greatest possible efforts.

Very conscious of her slightly shabby appearance, Janine stepped down, accepting the servant's offer of a white gloved hand to maintain her balance. To this man, her clothing was of no concern and had no relevance. Only how well his impeccable behaviour brought a good refection on this household was important.

Janine gave the servant an almost imperceptible nod. She knew, from experience, that this was the thing to do. This being the most recognition that a lady of good breeding would indulge on a servant. As the twins disembarked, she turned them and said, in lowered tones: "I feel shamefully under dressed."

"No, my lady," said Brian, courteously, "You look perfectly wonderful. Your clothes inherit your refinement. You make the clothes. The clothes do not make you."

Janine felt her cheeks flush a little pink, but suddenly realised that she was standing tall and elegantly and was secretly taken aback. She was a servant girl. There was nothing about her that contained any style or class or grace. She was, nonetheless, completely unashamed and was oddly disturbed by her own confidence in herself.

"Michael had not even noticed your attire.", said Bruce, casting a hand towards the servant who had helped her down.

"Not in the slightest!", confirmed Michael, shaking his head gravely and looking at the ground.

Janine looked at Michael's lowered head and felt overwhelmed with gratitude for his good heart and kindly manner. She was, however – for these purposes, it would appear – a lady and she should take such matters entirely for granted.

"Michael," said a female voice extremely close by. She suddenly realised that it was her own and that she had spoken, rather than simply thought what was in her head! Michael looked up, surprised to be addressed directly. "You," she continued, "Have the character of a gentleman and you bring great credit to this house."

"Your Ladyship!", replied the servant, nearly bursting with irrepressible delight.

"Michael, have Millet come up to the guest dressing room and bring Lady Janine some appropriate garments.", said Bruce.

"Yes, Sir. At one, Sir.", replied Michael.

Janine felt herself flinch, inwardly, at the use of the title "Lady" and, though becoming momentarily flustered in her mind, she managed to recover herself sufficiently to appear unruffled.

"And also," Bruce instructed further, "Have a word with Garrett and tell him that I speak for the Duke when I say that he should give favourable consideration to a slight increment in your salary."

"Yes, Sir! Thank you, Sir! Thank you, indeed!", the servant gushed.

"It would be a dereliction of my duty if I were to fail to take account of such a recognition by Lady Janine!", Bruce confided to Michael, who – in response – bowed reverently.

Bruce reached out his arm to Janine in invitation to walk and, as she took it, he drew her a little closer and whispered: "You now have a friend for life, there."

"He is a good man, who has risen high in the ranks at this house, but without losing his good nature or genuine sense of humanity.", Janine responded.

"You are a good judge of servants.", Bruce replied.

"Yes, of course I am, but I would be and with very good reason, I am sure you realise."

"We are all servants of God, Brian would say!", quipped Bruce.

Janine smile and floated, gracefully, across the paving and up the steps into the hall without faltering or hesitating in her instinctively refined demeanour. None of the servants, witnessing her arrival, had the slightest glimmer of doubt that she was a lady.

She was introduced to the Butler and the Matron Housekeeper, in the grand entrance, with its marble columns and gleaming marble floors. It was apparent that they had both formally summoned on her arrival. Janine had conducted herself amiably and graciously. The reaction of the two on first sight of her, however, was most puzzling. It was as if they had seen a ghost. The Butler had stared, open mouthed for a second, before regaining his composure. The Matron Housekeeper had gasped out loud and thrown her hand over her mouth to quell herself.

As they walked up the stairs, one of the servants hurried past them carrying a small trunk against his chest. Brian, a few steps behind, slowed to fall in beside them and kept pace with their ascent.

"Your bag is in the trunk.", Brian explained.

Janine felt instantly grateful for not having to endure the shame of arriving with such a grubby and pitiful thing on full display. Then she checked herself. She was a servant girl who had run away from her employer. She was a lowly individual of no consequence. Yet, here she was, striding around in a huge

mansion in the company of two men who were at perfect ease with this luxurious and lavish lifestyle.

She stopped abruptly, mid stride, and her two companions came to a rapid halt one step later. They look surprised. Janine glanced quickly over her shoulder, checking that nobody was around, and asked: "Do you have a plan or a reason for this deception?"

The twins looked hurt and replied, almost perfectly together: "It's not a deception!"

"We didn't want to bring you here and announce openly, to one and all, that you are a girl of humble situation, running from her previous position and fleeing the clutches of thieves and bandits.", protested Bruce.

"We cannot be sure that your assailants are not still on the lookout for you!", Brian warned.

"We thought," Bruce confided, "That this would be a safer refuge for you if nobody knew your identity. You could be totally anonymous and still be 'Janine' as long as they would not think to connect you with the girl they accosted."

Janine looked back and forth between them, her expression sceptical and dubious, before – much to their relief – broke into a smile.

"You were there for me when I was in distress and you are most kind to take me and to give me sanctuary.", she told them, "I scarcely dare think what might have become of me without your intervention."

They resumed their walk along the corridor, their new fellowship restored, and Janine felt comfortable and at ease with them, again. Bruce and Brian chatted to her, animatedly, about childhood memories of the rooms they passed and of the significance of this or that painting, alcove or suit of armour.

A door opened, some way ahead of them to the right, and a servant came out, backwards, alternately bowing and throwing his hands up in consternation. A woman's voice, raised in anger, could be heard but the words did not reach them clearly enough to make out.

Suddenly, two small rolls of bread shot out of the door in an arc towards the flustered servant. One caught him on the ear, the other straight in the forehead.

Janine and her two companions slowed their gait, looked at each other in blank amazement.

"My Lady! My Lady!", cried the servant, now cowering from what appeared to be the threat of further missiles. "It is the fashion! It is the way in the best social circle of Edinburgh and London!"

The voice from within the room could now be made out and the owner was evidently extremely annoyed!

“Don’t serve me stale bread and tell me that it is fashion!”, she shouted.

“My Lady!”, implored the servant, “It is not stale. It is hard.”

“Stale bread *is* hard!”, came the reply.

Hearing their approach, the servant turned and, seeing the twin brothers, threw up their hand beseechingly.

Bruce gestured back with a wave of his hand and the servant clasped his hands together, as if offering a prayer, to signify desperate gratitude.

“Aunt Ailsa,” Bruce called, his voice sweet and endearing.

In response, there was a dramatic gasp from the within the room. Janine quickly stepped into an alcove, feeling like a trespasser on this private scene. In the reflection of brightly polished metal plate, hung on the wall, she saw a woman, dressed in a beautiful peach coloured dress appear in the doorway.

Janine’s heart missed a beat and she leaned forward to stare more closely into the reflection in the plate. She was unable to contain the bizarre and troubling notion that she *knew* this woman.

Aunt Ailsa stood expectantly, eagerly scanning left and right to locate the speaker of the greeting, and brought her hand to her mouth to smother a gasp of delight at seeing her nephews. The peach fabric swirled as she stepped quickly and gracefully, moving like a dancer, to embrace Bruce.

Janine’s heart lurched, again, at this woman’s oddly familiar personal air and bearing. She had a powerful urge to bob her head out from her retreat to look closer, but – by sheer act of will – managed to contain it.

Janine could hear the Aunt uttering words of endearment and whispering fondly as she hugged Bruce close. She then pushed him a step to the side and pulled Brian into her arms. She gushed with words of gentle affection and whispered this and that in his ear before, eventually, releasing him.

The two brothers turned to introduce their guest but, on seeing Janine stood discretely aside, quickly changed their minds. After a minute or two of exchanging further pleasantries the brothers came to collect her from her hiding place and ushered her towards her accommodation.

They took her to what they called the ‘Pale Blue Rooms’ which turned out to be a set of private chambers decorated in colours appropriate to their description. She took stock of her surroundings and, mentally retracing their steps, concluded that they were now at the rear of the building. Her dressing room window looked out over a long, immaculately kept lawn that rose up a shallow hill to a small thicket of trees.

As she stood and looked, her head began to swim and she felt as if she were about to lose her balance. She felt Bruce quickly take her arm to steady her and she was glad to be able to lean against him for support.

"I'm sorry," she said, slightly breathlessly, "You must think me a dullard! I suddenly felt a little sick. I don't understand it. I am normally quite robust!"

The two brothers exchanged a look that had become familiar to her and she knew that they were taking her measure, as a person, again. The reason – she decided – was their vague bemusement with her choice of words and the manner of her speaking. She had, herself, attended several ladies of noble birth and was conversant with their behaviour and mannerisms. She was alarmed to realise that she had subconsciously adopted their style of speech and pose. The transition had been accomplished seamlessly, effortlessly and – still more strangely – without a moment's thought.

She looked back to the lawn, stretching into the distance, and a shiver ran through her and she experienced a fleeting moment of panic. She caught her breath in a sob. Her senses were playing tricks with her! She had felt unmistakable nostalgia. This that could not be! Deny it as she might, she felt a mysterious certainty that she had stood at this very window and seen this view before.