

Enigma of Fire

Marilyn Leach

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Dedication

To all those who have served or are serving their country with honor in military service, and to my family who are among them: Ace, Jason, Stevie, Floyd Jr., Blaine, and Melvin.

Other Berdie Elliott Mysteries

**Candle for a Corpse
Up from the Grave
Into the Clouds**

What People are Saying

Leach's careful attention to detail brings the English countryside to life. ~ Amanda Cabot, author

I love Marilyn's voice, and I hope there are MANY more books to come. ~ LA Sartor, bestselling author

Prologue

The wife and mother swept the floor in easy draws, the sound of the straw against the tile punctuated by the noise of her children playing.

“Get the children away from the window,” her husband commanded. The man jerked his hand from right to left and back again.

“What?”

His eyes flared and she could see the veins in his neck bulge as he stretched it forward. “Get the children away from the window. Now!”

“Children, come here.” She stopped her sweeping and motioned them to her.

The little boy pulled his sister’s toe in a silly game they played, and they both broke into voluble giggles.

“Children,” he screamed, “go to your mother!”

Both children started and eyed their father.

“What’s wrong?” She watched her husband move along the wall in a stealthy manner. “What’s wrong?”

“Shh, listen.” The man swallowed as he braced his rigid fingers against the door and put his ear close. “Can’t you hear them? Listen. They’re coming near.”

The little girl left her brother drawing finger circles on the floor and stepped close to her father. “Who’s near, Daddy?”

He grabbed the little girl’s jaw with his hand and squeezed it. She grimaced and tried to pull away, but he clung on all the tighter, and then laid his face nearly

on hers. "Quiet," he spoke in a hiss.

His wife drew a quick breath. "Oh no, God, please." Her prayer was short. The broom clattered as she dropped it to the floor and hurried to her daughter, putting her arms round her. "Yes, yes, we'll be silent," she assured her husband.

The man released his grip. "Stay low and stay alert. Find cover. We can't let them know we're here." He spun round and went toward the bedroom.

The mother bent down and pulled her daughter to her. The child leaned into her body and whimpered.

"Quiet, my love, you must be quiet." The mother stroked her little one's soft hair. "You must be a brave little girl."

She felt her hands begin to tremble as she came to her feet. Gripping her daughter's hand, with her other arm she scooped up her son, who sat quiet with wonder on the floor. Both children in hand, she darted her eyes cross the room. What now?

Her husband reentered the space. She gasped.

He gripped a gun braced against his side. He said nothing but moved determinedly along to the window. She could see the alarm in his eyes, his face skewed with fear, as if destructive possibilities screamed out a warning.

She felt tears spring to her eyes.

"What's Daddy doing?" her son asked in a tiny voice.

"You must be Daddy's brave little boy," she whispered and watched a tear trickle down her daughter's cheek, red from her father's clench.

The woman could feel the icy fingers of panic grip her heart. Holding her children's hands, she ran from the room into the kitchen where she grabbed a table

knife.

She spied the back corner behind the wooden table. "Come along, children," she encouraged. She crouched low, urging her precious little ones with her as they crawled along the floor under the table to the corner.

She could hear her husband bark unrecognizable slurs to those who threatened beyond.

"Are we playing army?" her little girl asked.

"Yes, yes, we're playing army. We must obey orders and stay quiet."

Her daughter's eyes were filled with bewilderment, and a single sob slipped from her tiny lips.

The woman maneuvered herself round and placed her back against the wall, her legs pressed against her chest where she hid the knife. She clutched her children, pulling them against the sides of her body. "We're going to stay right against the wall and close to each other." She could feel her heart pounding. "Remember Daddy loves you very much," she murmured as they huddled together in the dark corner. She tried to hum a calming lullaby, though her voice quivered. A single tear escaped and slowly slid down her hot cheek. "He loves us very much."

1

“Sometimes it feels the sweeping hands of that clock are wrapped round my toes and squeezing.”

The kitchen aroma of a well-prepared meal tickled Berdie Elliott’s nose as she placed decorated picnic ware in the ample food hamper, whilst aching feet reminded her that she hadn’t had a sit-down since early this morning.

“I tell you,” she said to her friend, Lillie Foxworth, who added folded linens to the plates, “sometimes it takes all one possesses to keep up.”

“True,” Lillie mumbled.

“When I followed my dear Hugh into the pastorate after his military retirement”—Berdie took a deep breath—“and I came with the same commitment of faith and service, mind you, I hadn’t reckoned that I’d be a hostel hostess in a small English village, racing the clock to feed the five thousand at Whitsun.”

“Oh, but remember, Berdie,” Lillie ribbed with a large grin and hazel-green eyes dancing, “to be hospitable at all times is a grace. You could be entertaining angels unawares.”

Berdie wagged a fork toward her friend. “Night wanderings, unwelcomed pets, demanding diets: if the guests staying here are angels, I should think their halos have slipped slightly.”

“Come now, Berdie.” Lillie took the fork from

Berdie's hand. "I've not noticed five thousand, just nine people at last count, and it's a picnic al fresco at the lake, not the village fete."

"You're such a stickler about minor details."

Lillie put the fork next to the others in the utensil basket and surveyed the situation. "There's no room in the hamper for the main dish."

"You see? Stickler for details." Berdie chuckled and Lillie joined her. "Take out the jar of pickled onions to make room. It's quite clear, Lillie, where our nattering gets us."

The sound of the vicarage front door chime sang out its plea for attention.

"Oh bother," flew from Berdie's lips.

"Ah, angels have come knocking. The word's out all cross the heavens," Lillie shouted as Berdie left the kitchen. "There's a room going spare at the vicarage and food to be had."

Berdie chortled while she hustled through the front hall.

She arrived at the pub mirror, placed just alongside the door, and glanced at herself. Middle age had been kind to her, but she hoped her brown eyes didn't appear as tired as she felt at the moment. She pushed an errant piece of her red-brown bobbed hair to its appropriate place, adjusted her tortoiseshell glasses, wiped her hand cross the ditsy designs of her apron that covered her more-pudgy-than-lean body, turned with steady mind for whatever may greet her, and flung the vicarage door open.

There before her stood Milton Butz, the inevitable dots of maturing adolescence decorating his fourteen-year-old face, and behind, his tall, ginger-haired friend, Kevin McDermott. Hardly heavenly beings.

"Milton, Kevin, hello," Berdie greeted.

"That big dog is running all over the village again, Mrs. Elliott." Milton released a slight pant.

"He's been digging in Mrs. Hall's herb garden, again." Kevin's round eyes held an element of panic as he took a deep breath. "And he's scary."

Berdie wanted to shout, "That annoying canine escape artist is more trouble than he's worth, and seeing as he belongs to retired Lieutenant Commander Cedric Royce, just one of our 'angelic' guests, the commander can ruddy well chase about after it." But instead, she offered a more refined response that was in line with her position and wouldn't shower the boys with her displeasure. "The dog's name is Sparks, and he's quite" —Berdie searched for a constructive word— "energetic for an animal his size and difficult to contain."

"He doesn't seem very friendly either," Kevin added.

"He's not a lap dog, no."

Milton's barrel chest rose and fell—the boys had obviously rushed. "Do you want us to collect him?"

"Milty." Kevin's eyes grew wider, and he kicked the back of Milton's shoe.

"He's just a dog." Milton's demeanor was fearless.

"Thanks for the offer, lads, but I believe Lieutenant Commander Royce is at the Upland Arms enjoying a swift half. Perhaps you could fetch him and let him deal with the beast."

"Beast?" Kevin's cheeks flushed under the freckles.

Milton looked slightly disappointed. "Are you sure you don't want us to try to collect Sparks?"

Kevin's eyebrows knit into a deep frown.

"Thank you for the offer, Milton, but the dog listens best to the commander." *In truth, the commander is the only one he listens to.*

"Yeah, OK, Mrs. Elliott. We'll fetch your guest."

"That dog isn't very friendly," Kevin reiterated.

The redhead stood at least six inches taller than Milton, but you could see who possessed the gravitas.

"See you then." Milton turned to go, while Kevin finally smiled, offered a hearty wave, and followed after his pal.

"God go with you," Berdie called after them.

And God help anyone who should try to corner that animal apart from Cedric.

In his stay with them so far, Sparks, the oversized black Labrador, didn't appear especially mean as Kevin described him, but he certainly wasn't approachable either. Mr. Braunhoff, the very capable churchwarden, had set up a portable sheep enclosure in the vicarage back garden for the creature when he arrived with the commander, but the dog seemed to find unfathomable ways to escape. Though he had dug up the vicarage peonies, eaten his own body weight daily in dog food, and urinated on the garden furniture, he seemed very loyal to Cedric. Hopefully, the boys would find Commander Royce, and Sparks would be contained again soon.

Moving her slender figure forward with grace, Lillie arrived in the hall. Short, loose curls of ebony-colored hair surrounded her tawny face. "Who was it?"

"That dog's jumped ship."

"Not again?"

"I haven't time to chase after the silly thing."

"What would you do with it once you found it anyway?"

"Should I dare say? I sent Milton Butz and Kevin McDermott to go fetch Cedric from the pub."

"Excellent plan, though that means the commander will be late for the picnic."

"He'll be in good company unless we push on."

"Now, now. I've got the meat pie snugly in its proper place, and we're ready for the off."

"You're a godsend, Lillie." Berdie still marveled that her husband, Hugh, had his first parish assignment right here at Saint Aidan of the Woods Parish Church in the very village, Aidan Kirkwood, where her dearest friend lived. She and Lillie had been chums since university, some thirty years ago.

The three and a half years she and Hugh had spent here seemed but a minute. And now she had only minutes before the lunch was due at the lake.

Upon reentering the kitchen, Berdie was in command mode. "Let's take the food hampers first and then the drinks chest. They're all going to be very hungry."

"And weary, aching, plus wet through, I shouldn't wonder."

"Most likely." Berdie grabbed the jar of pickled onions. "And they'll relish every throbbing moment of it, mark my words."

"Here we are." Berdie espied the scull with four oarsmen the moment she parked the car at road's edge. It moved along with rhythmic oars in the sun-reflective waters near the shoreline of Bampkingswith Hall's Presswood Lake. Though Colonel and Mrs. Presswood now resided in their London flat the lion's share of

time, they had allowed a small rowing club to let their boathouse, using the lake and its grounds as they would.

“Man the hampers,” Lillie jibed.

Berdie and Lillie made way to the water’s edge where Berdie caught sight of Hugh’s silver-white hair. She watched his back expand then constrict while his middle-aged legs pushed a steady rhythm in chorus with his comrades. The sound of the crew’s verbal labors met her ears as they forced their oars through the water.

“Keep it steady,” Hugh called out.

Though he wasn’t wearing his naval-captain shoulder amulets of his past military career, nor the clerical collar that was his current badge of office, his leadership was evident.

“Nice release, Chad,” Hugh commended the young and very fit bowman, who possessed dark, handsome features.

“Always, Captain.” Chad’s voice was buoyant.

“Good pace.” Hugh grunted and inhaled. “We’re on a promise to take it all, men. What say?”

“I can row or I can chunter, but I can’t do both at the same time.” Rollie, a fellow Hugh’s age but not quite as in trim, worked to get the words out.

David, the reserved and ever-thoughtful fourth crewman, chuckled.

Berdie adjusted her sunhat and waved to Hugh. “Lunch’s arrived.”

“Right on time or close enough,” he shouted.

The other boatmen cheered heartily.

“Land ho,” Hugh directed his crew.

Lillie shielded the sun from her eyes with her hand as she observed the men. “They seem to be in

high spirits.”

Berdie nodded. “That’ll be the endorphins running amuck. We’ll see if they are still jaunty round eight this evening when painful aches and sore muscles set in.”

By the time the crew reached the shore, settled the boat in its proper place, and considered the times of their runs, Berdie and Lillie had the hampers emptied and food laid out on the portable table they set up near the edge of the lake, several yards from the road.

Berdie was pleased with her table. Chicken-and-ale pie, which had found a place in the hamper, was joined by country ham and piccalilli sandwich rounds, spicy sausage rolls, cucumber pickles, Scotch eggs, peach cup crumbles, and homemade lime cordials: a fine picnic by anyone’s standards.

“I want this picnic to be special,” Berdie said. “Hugh’s worked so very hard, not only to assemble this crew, but he’s tireless in all his service to the church.”

“Then we must add this.” Lillie held up some Union Jack bunting, a string of vibrant triangles, to Berdie’s view.

“Perfect.”

While Lillie draped the decorative bunting across the table edge, the men approached.

Hugh led the lively crew to the luncheon table: former Lieutenant Chadwick Meryl, the youngest, whose rowing gear clung to his well-built body; gray-headed retired Captain Rollie Lloyd, who kept the chaps in good humor despite muscle aches; and sun-kissed David St. John, shy but kind, who left the Navy as a young chief petty officer to work as an IT specialist. This was the St. Aidan of the Wood Church crew that was to race in the Whitsun Regatta

sponsored by multiple parishes across the county. It wasn't the first time they teamed with one another, they had served together in the same naval intelligence unit, and were now all chums together. And in three weeks Monday, the bank holiday, they would row their hardest to vie for the winning trophy.

Hugh made introductions to Lillie and then began unfolding garden chairs he fetched from the backseat of Rollie's car, Dave helping out.

"Hugh said we'd have a picnic at the lake. I didn't realize it would be a banquet." Chad ran the back of his hand over his forehead, his deep-set brown eyes focused on the laden table. "This meal, in and of itself, makes coming to Aidan Kirkwood worth it all."

"Mrs. Elliott doesn't do things by halves." Rollie grinned and nodded to Berdie.

Berdie smiled in return. Rollie and his wife, Joan, had recently moved to Timsley, the nearby market town. And although they were longtime friends, she and Hugh were just getting reacquainted with the Lloyds again. "Your Joan would do nothing less."

Dave unfolded a chair. "We have a fine boathouse here, but no café. It's a small club, and I rather prefer it that way."

"This lot beats a café," Chad rebutted. "Al fresco suits me."

Hugh brought more chairs and set them round. "That's the lot." He sighed. "We're missing Busby, of course, but he's off visiting family in Canada."

"Ah, Busby. I'm surprised he didn't fly in just for the meat pie," Rollie teased.

"Indeed." Hugh rubbed his hands and stood tall, every ounce of his six-foot frame at attention. "I believe grace is in order."

Berdie watched Rollie and Dave bow their heads as Chad glanced round, apparently unaccustomed to such a thing, and then dipped his chin.

"For what we are about to receive, we are truly thankful, Lord. Feed and refresh us. Amen."

"Amen," Berdie, Lillie, and Dave responded.

"And God give us the grace to rise from our beds in the morning without the aid of a large hoist." Rollie rubbed his arm.

Berdie served the fellows their cordials.

"I should think a toast to absent friends is appropriate as well." Hugh held up his drinks glass. "To absent friends."

All repeated, "Absent friends."

Chad respectfully added, "To Ennis Wolf."

"To Ennis," the men repeated and took a swallow of lime cordial.

"Tuck in," Berdie invited, and the crew set to.

As she helped serve, she became aware that Doug Devlin and his daughter, Tillie, two of the "angels" currently staying in her home, had arrived by cab at the road's edge. They were making the lengthy trek cross the wild, grass-anchored soil that led to their picnic table.

And trek it was. Tillie gripped her father's wheelchair handles with tight fists, her slim twenty-something body calling upon all her weight to push. Tillie's long blonde hair fell forward as she leaned to thrust with her anchored legs, churning slowly across the soft earth.

Moisture appeared along Doug's blond hairline, his broad chest and muscular arms engaged as he worked to push the wheels along with his hands as well, angling and dipping as they went.

Though they had already been guests at the vicarage for nearly a week, Berdie had prepared and placed the picnic without any real thought to Doug's circumstances. She watched Tillie struggle. Doug used his leg to awkwardly balance while his other trouser leg lay empty below the knee.

Berdie felt suddenly negligent. "Dear Lord," she whispered.

Though Chad was the first to come to Tillie's aid, all the fellows set their plates aside to assist.

"You old sea dog, Devlin," Chad chided his pal.

"Chad Meryl, when did you arrive?"

"Just in time for a good thrash round the lake and a grand tea," he answered. "And this isn't the last you'll see of me. I'll be staying at the vicarage as well." Chad took control of the wheelchair as Tillie released her grip. "Let me help."

"Very kind," she responded in between breaths.

"Doug"—Rollie stepped lively to his friend—"good to see you."

Doug stuck out his hand. "Rollie, how's retired life?"

The men heartily clasped hands and shook.

Hugh and Dave stamped their feet in an obvious attempt to compact the soil and create an even track for the wheelchair to the table.

"My, his daughter is dedicated to take that slog on," Lillie noted to Berdie.

"She is indeed. Dedicated to the bone." Berdie once again felt a pang of guilt and bit her lip. "I never thought about access."

"Nonsense. He wants to be here with his Navy mates," Lillie reminded. "He'd probably wheel himself across the Sahara in a sandstorm to spend time with

them."

Berdie watched as the men, and Tillie, made way to the table. "I'm sure he wishes he could be rowing again with his team. Still, at least I can give him a tasty meal for all his work."

"That's right. You've done a splendid job here."

Lillie was right. Being host to four guests, one of whom had special considerations, was just like her role as village vicar's wife. Berdie took it on as it came, learning as she went along.

"Wonderfully laid, Mrs. Elliott." Tillie reached the table where her darkest blue eyes took it all in.

"Did you enjoy your morning at the Timsley History Museum?" Berdie asked.

"A bit taxing for Dad, but yes," Tillie answered.

"This is grand." Doug cheered while Chad placed him at the table and set the wheelchair's brake.

"I'll fetch a plate for you, Dad," Tillie offered.

"You know what he likes best." Berdie once again felt she had overlooked an obvious need.

Doug eyed the eggs. "You know, I could fill the plate with Scotch eggs alone and be completely satisfied."

Berdie brightened while Lillie gave a casual laugh.

"Now, Dad, you need to think of your health. There's plenty of other good food. No Scotch eggs."

"My daughter doesn't let me get away with much." Doug grinned.

While Tillie filled a plate, Lillie leaned close to Berdie. "How old is she?"

"She's not yet twenty-five."

"Quite young to be the parent."

Berdie nodded. "Perhaps she had to be." Berdie spoke softly. "Her mother left Tillie and Doug several

years back.”

“I see.”

“I’ve made a subtle attempt, since she’s been here, to introduce her to some young people her age.”

“Subtle, that’s a new tactic on your part.”

“I sent her to a party at Matthew Reese’s home last night. I made a promise to keep Doug safe and sound. She got in late. Positive sign. This morning, she said she had enjoyed herself.”

Berdie directed her full voice to the young woman. “I’ll give what you’ve dished up to your father, and you can fill your own plate.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Elliott, but I’ve got it.” Tillie’s smile was pleasant.

While everyone tucked into their food, Berdie heard the arrival of another guest, one who was not invited. She recognized that bark anywhere now.

Sparks, on a lead, thank heaven, made way to the picnic table with Cedric on the other end, who indeed was invited. Sparks actually grew quiet and stood to heel of the commander, who tugged lightly on the lead.

“What’s he doing here?” Chad’s loud words didn’t sound rhetorical.

Hugh raised his eyes to the approaching silver-haired friend and smiled. “Oh, the commander takes Sparks most everywhere he goes now. He’s staying with us too.”

“I don’t mean the dog,” flew like bullets from Chad’s mouth as he sprang from his chair. “What’s *he* doing here?”

“Cedric? I invited him, of course, to come cheer his fellows on, to watch the regatta.” Hugh’s tone suddenly had a guarded edge.