

the Fire Star

A MAVEN & REEVE MYSTERY



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PENGUIN BOOKS

CHAPTER ONE



Wednesday

Of all the things I'd imagined might stop us from reaching Rennart Castle by nightfall, goats had not even made the top fifty.

Before setting out, my number-one source of nightmares had been that we'd encounter the King's men. But four horsemen wearing King Bren's gold-embroidered tunics had galloped past us a few miles back, flinging nothing more than mud and disdain in our direction as they'd carelessly forced us off the narrow road.

Once they'd rounded the bend towards the capital, I'd breathed a sigh of relief, thinking our passage clear.

After all, if the loathed King's disreputable followers had left us alone, then surely nothing would stop us?

And yet, here we are, minutes later, held hostage by six goats, a lame horse and an overturned cart.

And the boy. Wearing the tunic emblazoned with the bright blue fox that marks him as property of Sir Garrick Sharp, Knight Protector of Rennart Castle, he is my lady's worst nightmare come to life in black hose and tall black boots. I'd heard her utter a most unlady-like word under her breath as we'd rounded the corner at full canter, nearly taking out a hairy white goat before skidding to a stop.

'All hail,' the boy had shouted, red-faced as he'd wrestled an unhappy brown goat towards a wooden crate lying on its side by the cart. 'Sorry, good mistresses. Won't be a jiffy. Just helping Master Seymour here with his goats. He, er, ran into some trouble.'

'Trouble ran into me, more like,' the old man had muttered. 'That young wastrel's lackeys, intent only on themselves, as usual.'

I did not look at Cassandra, and neither of us had replied. Whispers about King Bren and his friends and their pleasure-seeking, law-breaking ways waft across the kingdom of Cartreff on every breeze, but it would not do to discuss them here, on the road, with strangers. People have been hanged for less.

After watching the boy for a few moments, I begin to

realise that ‘a jiffy’ might last a very long time if we have to rely on the goat-herding skills of this squire. Having finally grabbed hold of the brown goat with one hand, he tries to right the overturned crate with the other before realising he needs two hands . . . and lets go of the goat.

With a quiet oath, he pushes the crate upright before setting off after the goat again but, every time he moves, the goats scatter in different directions, bleating with indignation.

I risk a glance at Cassandra, but she has pulled the hood of her tattered cloak down low and is unrecognisable within its folds. Her hand taps her cloak, right where the saddlebag would be, as it has done hundreds of times since we left home. She knows it is secure, its contents wrapped safely inside, but she cannot help herself – as I could not, were I in her position.

I turn my attention back to the boy, who is so busy with his goat duties he barely glances our way, giving me ample time to observe him. When they’d handed out looks, this boy had been front and centre, waving his arms and flashing a charming smile. From his perfect blond ringlets to his dimple, he is what my sisters would describe as worth watching.

When they’d handed out brains, however . . .

‘You do realise that’s not going to work, don’t you?’ I say at last, taking care to use the harsh vowels of a peasant girl.

Cassandra flashes me a hard stare, but we do not have time to waste watching this boy flail about in the dust while a dazed old man looks on.

‘What do you mean?’ the boy asks, flushing an even deeper red.

‘You can’t talk them into the crate,’ I say. ‘They’re not young ladies to be charmed. And even if they were, you’d need to do better than that. Polite chiding will not herd goats.’

I cannot resist the dig. I may be only fifteen, but I have seen his type before, over and over. Dark haired, blond, red-headed, it doesn’t matter. They are always charming, always affecting the latest fashion in tunics or poetry or swordplay and always, in the end, utterly useless at anything beyond flowery words.

‘Humph,’ the boy says. ‘If you know so much about goats, you do better.’ His lapse of courtly manners shows me just how fed up he is. Squires like him are usually on their best behaviour at all times – in public, anyway.

‘No –’ I hear Cassandra begin, but I have already slithered off the horse and landed square on the road. Mother always said that my inability to resist a challenge would one day be my downfall. Then again, Mother always said a lot of things.

‘Oh, fine then,’ Cassandra continues. ‘But make it snappy. We do have better places to be.’

My challenger has moved to sit next to the silent old man on the edge of the overturned cart and is now waving in the direction of the goats as though to say ‘have at it’.

‘The key,’ I say, moving purposefully towards the largest goat, a sizeable nanny with a full white beard, ‘is to show them who is boss.’

‘Is that so,’ says the boy as the old man passes him an apple. He has regained some of his poise, and I give him points for that. His tunic appears new, which surprises me, as he looks to be at least sixteen. That blue fox should have a few years’ wear on it by now, as most squires take up their duties by the age of fourteen.

‘Indeed,’ I respond, even as my mind works through the conundrum of his background. ‘One must establish oneself as the leader of the herd.’

I hear a loud crunch behind me and realise that the boy is munching his apple. But I remain fixed on the nanny goat as I approach, looking deep into her sharp brown eyes. I stand over her for a few moments, making sure I have her complete attention, before I turn and begin walking slowly towards the crate.

To my absolute relief, I hear the clank of the bell around her neck as she begins to follow me, bleating mournfully as she walks, as though to say ‘can you believe the morning I’ve had?’. I almost bleat back.

‘Good lord,’ I hear the boy murmur as other bells begin clanking. I risk a glance behind me to see, with a spurt of unexpected glee, that the other goats are falling into line.

‘Do you have any more of those apples?’ I call out to the old man, who procures another from a grubby bag that has spilled from the overturned cart and throws it to me. Catching it neatly in one hand, I nip around the side of the wooden crate, to the very far corner, and push the apple in through the slats. The nanny goat walks through the door, heading straight for the apple, and the other goats follow.

‘And that,’ I say, pushing the door shut and fastening it with the brown ribbon that I pull from my hair, ‘is how you herd goats.’

To his credit, the boy stands and applauds, those golden curls glinting in the sunlight. ‘Well done,’ he says, sincerely, as I push my hair-envy away. ‘Though I do wish I’d thought to ask about apples a lot earlier.’

I can’t help but laugh. ‘If you think an apple would have helped you . . .’

The teeth flash, and a dimple appears. ‘Well, it couldn’t have made things worse.’

‘Ahem.’ Lady Cassandra clears her throat conspicuously, and I jump, remembering where I am. I am glad she has been smart enough not to use my name, but

I am kicking myself nonetheless for getting distracted by small talk. It isn't part of the plan at all.

'We must go,' my lady continues.

'Oh, but can you help me turn this cart before you go?' The charming smile is back, the blue eyes upon me.

'If it's quick,' I say, keeping my expression neutral, and adjusting my hood back around my face. He'd seen it, of course, and my hair when I'd whipped the ribbon out of it, but, as my mother has told me from birth, mine is not a memorable face. Not that it bothers me. Combined with mid-brown hair, blah brown eyes and enough nous to stay silent when it suits me, my forgettable face serves me well.

Fortunately, the boy seems to take my lead – rather like a goat – for the small talk dries up as we push the cart upright. I look to the crate, now full of goats, still on the road.

'I'm afraid that your next problem will be getting the crate onto the cart,' I say.

He looks nonplussed. 'I hadn't thought of that,' he says. 'I don't suppose . . .'

'Maven!' Now my lady's voice is impatient, and I simply shake my head at the boy's beseeching eyes and cross back towards my waiting mare.

'May I help you remount?' he asks, following me across the road.

‘I can get on my own horse,’ I respond, putting one foot in the stirrup and vaulting into the saddle. There had been a time when I’d envied the men and boys around me their breeches, but over the years I’ve pushed the boundaries of my limited life as far as practicable and have learned to do everything I need to do in a skirt. And if my skirts, made to my own design for the last few years, have always been too plain and too sensible to ever be in fashion, so be it. At least I will always have pockets, and will never have to ride side-saddle like my sisters.

Fortunate, too, that, unlike my sisters, I have no need to mourn the life I once had. The plain dress of a servant suits me well.

‘Come,’ says Lady Cassandra, whose voluminous travelling cloak hides the fact that her emerald-green dress is rucked up around her knees. She nudges her horse forward, and I follow, barely glancing at the crate of bleating goats and never looking back. She has mentioned my name, I realise, but my hope is that he will be so caught up with his goat crisis he will never remember.

‘Will we still make it by nightfall?’ Lady Cassandra asks, once we’ve ridden along the road, deeper into the forest, away from listening ears.

‘As long as we don’t spend too long with the Beech Circle,’ I respond.

‘We’ll spend as long as it takes,’ she retorts, before digging her heels into the horse’s side and taking off at a gallop.

I urge my horse forward and follow, knowing that we are racing headlong into trouble.