

**INTO THE FIRE – © MANDA SCOTT 2015**

**CHAPTER ONE**

**ORLÉANS**

**MONDAY 24<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY 2014**

**02:00**

*Encore un feu...*

Again, another fire, and this one a vast, leaping beacon, fit to melt the rooftops of slumbering Orléans.

Picaut can see the glare from the window as she throws on jeans and jacket. Outside, she navigates by its light, following the scorched sky through winding streets in her car and then on foot.

A paved courtyard ten metres deep acts as a break between the fire and the road. This close, a savage heat sucks the breath from her lungs, dries the film of tears from her eyes. The flames are many times higher than the building on which they feed and brighter than any man-made light.

The roar is deafening, loud enough to swamp the traffic and mute the many sirens. This fire is bigger than any of the three that have come before it and this, unlike its predecessors, has been lit in the old town, in the pattern of narrow, cobbled streets between the cathedral and the river. Nothing is isolated here: tonight, Orléans could lose its ancient, beating heart.

Worse, the air is dense with the taste of evaporating iron, of molten plastic, glass and mortar, but under these, threading through them, rising, is the stench of burning hair and blood and bone and this is new. Before, the fires ate buildings, not people. This one is feasting on flesh and, by the look of the municipal police and state police and random hangers-on all standing at a safe

distance, no-one can get close enough even to begin to find out who the victims are. Were.

*'Capitaine!'*

The call comes from behind, away from the fire. Turning, Picaut takes a moment to see who has called her, and then wishes she hadn't.

She nods a kind of greeting. 'Lieutenant Garonne.'

When they were lieutenants together, he was Guillaume and she was Inès and they were as close as any professional relationship could be that stood just on the safe side of intimacy. They were matched in temperament and style and had forged in the furnace of detection and risk, a friendship that was greater than the job, or so they told themselves.

But that was then and this is now, and now he speaks to her only when he has to, which is more often than either of them would like.

Garonne is a soft man in a hard man's frame which has begun to revert to type. He is of an age where the last round of promotions was his final chance to make Captain. Nine months later, he carries his disappointment in bags beneath his eyes.

Tonight, though, he arrived at the crime scene several minutes before Picaut and he wishes her to know this. His notepad is thick with new writing and he flourishes it as evidence that he is the better officer, she in dereliction of her duty.

He reads by blistering firelight. 'Hôtel Carcassonne. Owned and run by Mme Foy, who was present when the fire began. She had seven patrons; six are there—' He gestures over his shoulder to the refugees clustered at the margins of the fire's light. 'The seventh remains unaccounted for.'

Even by the standards of the last few months, Garonne is angry with her, which is saying something. His eyes search her for hidden clues. He called her home number and she wasn't there and she didn't answer the mobile until the seventh ring, or maybe the eighth and so he knows that she knows that he knows

that she didn't spend the night at her apartment, and, because this is the way of things, he suspects that, wherever she slept, she wasn't alone. And she knows, and he knows that she knows, that he's Luc's friend now, not hers, and will report anything and everything that he suspects.

A pair of wraparound shades rests on his brow, a ridiculous affectation in the middle of the night. Looking into the lenses, Picaut sees herself reproduced twice over; small, slim, slight-of-build, with short-ish, ragged-ish, unruly hair, that is never quite blonde. She thinks her face is too freckled for grace, her grey eyes set too wide for beauty. Luc, at his most romantic, called her 'fascinating.'

She is not fascinating now. She is tired and fed up and wants to go back to bed and where that is, and with whom, if anyone, is her own fucking business.

She doesn't smell of sex, she isn't wearing lace underwear and because she's wearing what she always wears, which is yesterday's jeans and a sleeveless white t-shirt that wouldn't hide anything, under an oversized buckskin jacket, Garonne, and so Luc, should know that she has nothing to hide.

She presses her fingers to her face, crimps her eyes, shuts out the past. 'Who's the seventh patron? The one left inside?'

'Mme Foy can't remember his name. He booked in this afternoon, but she was talking on the phone to her pregnant daughter who has just had a scan and has discovered that she's carrying twins. In her excitement, Mme Foy failed to commit her new client's name to memory. He was tall, moderately good looking, but not excessively so. He was white, dark haired. She thinks he is English, or maybe American. Which is to say his French was perfunctory and he spoke his English with an accent.'

Which narrows it down not at all. 'Fucking wonderful.'

'The German—' Garonne jerks his thumb over his shoulder, 'thinks he was American.'

'Why?'

'He overheard a phone call at dinner at which our missing man referred to colleagues at Cornell University and said he had asked them to "expedite the results."' "

'How good's his English?'

'Better than mine.'

That sets the bar fairly low, but not impossibly so. Picaut turns to look. In the sorry huddle of the former hotel's patrons, any one of the men could be German.

The women though... there's one that catches the eye; set apart from the rest. 'What about her?'

'Who, the black?'

Oh, dear God. To Guillaume Garonne, anyone is black who can't trace a dozen generations of pure white French ancestry to before the First Republic, but just this once, he's right: this woman is not the Arab-black that is really olive brown, but ebony black, West African black, tall, lean savannah-black with brilliant black hair that falls to her shoulders in an avalanche of polished treacle.

She is interesting, that's the point. Anyone who stands out from the crowd is interesting and tonight, in this company, this woman is the shining jewel in the coal pile, the bird of paradise amongst sparrows.

The rest are no different to anyone else who has been dragged out of bed in the pit of night at the time when plasma cortisol runs well below coping levels, saggily uncomfortable in hotel dressing gowns and bare feet.

The woman, by contrast, sports an effortless Paris chic: Agnès b meets Jean Paul Gaultier with just the right hint of nostalgia for Galliano's bad-boy Dior. She could grace the front cover of Vogue. She probably has.

'Who is she?'

Garonne consults his notes as if she hasn't burned herself onto his memory. 'Monique Susong. She's from Paris. She...' His eyes grow tight at their corners.

'Why is that funny?'

'Never mind.' It's late. Picaut is tired. A year ago, less, he would have seen the humour in this. A year ago, he wouldn't have thought it necessary to state the obvious in the first place. She hasn't the energy to cosset him. She substitutes briskness for what once would have been humanity. 'What's she doing here?'

'What do you mean?'

'It doesn't look to me as if the Hôtel Carcassonne is – was – a five star venue. What's someone like Monique Susong doing in a place like this?'

'I haven't—'

'Find out. And get any CCTV from the area and have it ready viewed by tomorrow morning with notes of anyone or anything that might give us answers.' Picaut spins back to the hotel. 'Is he definitely inside, our missing man?'

'Nobody knows. They all followed the fire drill – there are cards prominently displayed in every room, we are not to suggest otherwise – and came out when the alarm rang. By the time Mme Foy had counted them and realized he was missing, the fire was too fierce for anyone to go back in. She swears she didn't see him leave at any point but that's no guarantee when—'

'When her family's fecundity is quite so mind-numbingly astonishing. So we need to start taking statements from anyone and everyone, particularly from the German who sort-of speaks English and our Parisian peacock. Find their home addresses, why they're here, how long they were planning to stay, what they ate, thought, said. Get their mobile records, everything. Then we can... Thank, Christ. At last.'

With flashing lights and screaming brakes: the Fire Department. In truth, it hasn't been long since the proprietor first rang with the news; just that time becomes more flexible when there's a fire at hand.

The small square in front of the burning building knows a brief, frenzied chaos, but they have had three nights of practice within the past three weeks and the

disorder resolves itself with remarkable speed into the kind of order that kills fires, even this one.

The river runs less than three blocks away and the winter has been a wet one. They have enough water to drown the town; all they need do is get it to where it needs to be, and they are good at this.

Presently, a dozen jets of water arc into the fire's heart, wearing it down. In the morning, Picaut and her team will be permitted to don hard hats and sift through wet soot and falling masonry in an effort to work out who did this and why.

Actually, if this fire is remotely like its predecessors, a coded call will come in to the central office in west Orléans any time now from a man with a strong (and therefore possibly fake) Malian accent, claiming to represent 'Jaish al Islam'.

He will tell them that his group lit the fire as 'a statement against the infidel' which represents a part of the ongoing retaliation for France's role in the internal affairs of that small African state. An hour later, he will email a .wav file of his statement to the national and international news agencies and by dawn, therefore, it will be playing in every household in France.

To date, these 'statements' have detailed the destruction of the homes and/or businesses of: a professor of literature; the owner of a small boutique wine grower who sells well into London and New York; and the leader of the Orléans branch of the Young Socialists.

All three are women. All three have written a post at some point in the last year on a blog called, 'La Femme du Jour', which claims to be dedicated to 'celebrating all that is best of French women'.

All three are also Caucasian, middle class and attractive and while they have not died, they have been rendered homeless, their livelihoods assaulted, their very Frenchness sullied. Their portrait photographs have graced a series of front pages whose editors have wept tears of unrestrained joy with every new addition.

Everyone else has wept over the front pages, too, though not with joy. It is an election year – in France, when is it not? – but this year more than most, the popular fury is a palpable thing. Last year’s gay marriage demo-riots have segued into running battles with the police sparked by anything from the rising price of bread to youth unemployment to a ship load of illegal immigrants found at a southern ferry terminal.

Orléans was a bastion of relative calm until the fires began. Now, even here, small clots of disaffected youths prowl the streets seeking reasons to turn feral. In the living rooms of their elders, with the ballots due to be cast in just short of a week’s time, the polls are shifting increment by increment away from the parties of liberal ideals, towards those who favour an all-white France, populated by real men who will defend their women to the death if necessary, from coloured incomers who choose to tell them what they can and cannot do.

Lieutenant Guillaume Garonne is thrilled by this: in his lifetime, his dream of white supremacy may come true.

That time has not yet come and, in the meantime, as Picaut points out, Garonne is obviously aching to return to his taking of statements from the hotel’s owner and her four surviving clients.

Glowering, he leaves her. Picaut is about to join him, to interview the alarmingly chic Monique Susong, when her Nokia rings.

‘Picaut.’

‘It’s Patrice,’ says Patrice cheerfully. Patrice Lacroix is the team’s technological wunderkind. A skateboarding, kitesurfing computer gamer, he lives on a diet of Red Bull and coffee and seems never to sleep.

‘Your call’s come,’ he says. ‘Same voice, same signal. See if you can hold him on the line.’

‘I won’t be able to. He never says anything beyond his prepared statement.’

‘Still, try. I need just shy of thirty seconds. Ask him out on a date; tell him how hot you are for him. Anything to keep him on the line.’

'Fuck you, too.'

'Anytime.'

They are recording this call. In the old days, you could tell by the hollowness when a line was being recorded. Now, it sounds the same as all the rest. Picaut waits to hear it connect.

*'Ici L'armée du Prophète, Jaish al Islam...'*

The call lasts twelve seconds. Patrice does not get a trace. Picaut watches the fire fight against the water, spitting steam and ash and smoke. The roar becomes a wail, undercut by a tympanic stutter of things warped and stretched beyond the laws of physics.

Garonne martial all the hotel's residents and stakes out his territory right across the courtyard. He may be angry with her, but he is good at this: the traumatised men and women, even Monique Susong of the black skin and wild hair, will feel safe in his hands.

Leaving him to it, Picaut steps around a corner, and then, because she can still smell smoke, can still feel the falling cinders, and truly, she thinks better in the quiet dark, she steps around another, and another until the flames are barely a sulphured rent in the sky, showing through to a hell of others' devising.

Four fires in under three weeks and only this one with a body inside. Why change the pattern now? Did he die by accident, caught in the fire? Or was the fire lit to kill him?

And before all of that, why here? Of all the places in France and the world, why light four fires in Orléans?

Ideas come best to a free mind. Picaut tilts her head back, looks up at the obsidian sky, at the orange tint along the western edge, at the pinhole pricks of stars. Clouds streak across that at any other time would be whispers of wind, bearing the promise of rain, but here, tonight, now are too much like smoke.

Her gaze comes to rest on a plaque on the opposite wall.



SIEGE D'ORLEANS

OCTOBRE 1428 – MAJ 1429

LA VILLE D'ORLEANS RECONNAISSANTE DEDUE CETTE

PLAQUE EN HONEUR DES SOLDATS ECOSSAIS DE L'AULD

ALLIANCE VENUS COMBATTRE POUR LEVER LE SIEGE

D'ORLEANAIS...

The Auld Alliance: Scots brogue carved into immortality. If she is not careful, she will start to see her father here, which is impossible. By chance – it does feel like chance – Picaut has come to his place of pilgrimage, the stopping-place where he rested when his breathing was bad but he could still walk down to the river, and long before that, it was the place he brought her to when she was too young to walk, but old enough to listen to the stories that fired his passion.

'It was here, *cherie*, in the heart of France, that the tide of English ambition broke and broke and broke and was turned back. See? Their names are here...'

JOHN STUART OF DARNLEY, PATRICK OGILVY, HUGH KENNEDY, THOMAS BLAIR: she knows the names by heart. As a child, she stood in her father's study and recited them as a way to lift a smile. For a while, say, until she was ten, this strategy worked. They were the good years, when he was free of the world's scorn. She remembers them as she remembers old films, as an interesting narrative of someone else's life. THOMAS BLAIR, THOMAS HOUSTON, EDWARD OF LENNOX, MICHAEL NORWILL...

'Papa, why did they come?' She is six years old, perhaps, or seven. Old enough to know that dying is not good, young enough not yet to know that sometimes it is better than living.

'Because the enemy of my enemy is my friend.' Her father's laughter is dry. In retrospect, it perhaps harbours layers of inference she does not understand at the time. 'The Scots hated the English with a passion and when a whole succession of English kings tried to claim France as their own, generations of

Scots came here to fight them off. They were more loyal to our king than was his own cousin, the Duke of Burgundy. The Burgundians fought on the English side then, to their eternal shame.

'But it was the Maid who broke the siege. She led the army out against the English.' This she has known from her earliest years.

'She did indeed. The Scots may have helped to hold the walls, but it was the Maid who turned the tide. Close your eyes. Can you see her? There she is, astride the king's great, white war horse, clad in the unmarked plate, lance in one hand, small-axe in the other, riding out of the gate at the head of the army.

'Think of that! In a world where women were chattels, she was passion incarnate. France had lost so many battles then, many they should have won when they had superior numbers, superior arms, still, they lost. Our knights were demoralised, our armies shrunk to nothing: who wants to fight when they're guaranteed to lose?

'Then the Maid arrived. She took the war-weary, war-feart, war-lazy men of France, and she shamed them all into action, until even those who didn't want to fight found themselves winning, and once they were winning, they found that they liked it.'

He scoops her up, her father, whirls her round, sends the stars spinning. 'But the old goats who surround me, even now, in the twenty first century, are so afraid of the idea of a girl who can fight, that they clothe her in magical myth...

And he is off again, staring out into the place only he can see, where past and future come together and a wrong is put right and the frayed fabric of history is made whole again.

Except, of course, that it is not. He is ruined, his reputation shredded by the old goats who had no qualms about assaulting anyone who had the temerity to question the sanctity of their beliefs.

And he is dead.

He is dead and his obsession is dead with him and if there is grief, there is also an overwhelming relief and one day she will come to terms with the uneven balance of these.

In the meantime, she has a fire to contend with, and a whole new set of enemies, far less evident than the English, who would make of her city a battleground in a war for which she does not yet understand the reason.

She salutes the plaque in the way she has done for almost all her life and retraces her steps round one corner and another and back to the smouldering wreck of a hotel, which is now the site of a murder.