

The Fire: A Novel

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Katherine Neville's groundbreaking novel, *The Eight*, dazzled audiences more than twenty years ago and set the literary stage for the epic thriller. A quest for a mystical chess service that once belonged to Charlemagne, it spans two centuries and three continents, and intertwines historic and modern plots, archaeological treasure hunts, esoteric riddles, and puzzles encrypted with clues from the ancient past. Now the electrifying global adventure continues, in Neville's long anticipated sequel: *THE FIRE*

2003, Colorado: Alexandra Solarin is summoned home to her family's ancestral Rocky Mountain hideaway for her mother's birthday. Thirty years ago, her parents, Cat Velis and Alexander Solarin, believed that they had scattered the pieces of the Montglane Service around the world, burying with them the secrets of the power that comes with possessing it. But Alexandra arrives to find that her mother is missing and that a series of strategically placed clues, followed swiftly by the unexpected arrival of a mysterious assortment of houseguests, indicates that something sinister is afoot.

When she inadvertently discovers from her aunt, the chess grandmaster Lily Rad, that the most powerful piece of Charlemagne's service has suddenly resurfaced and the Game has begun again, Alexandra is swept into a journey that takes her from Colorado to the Russian wilderness and at last into the heart of her own hometown: Washington D.C.

1822, Albania: Thirty years after the French Revolution, when the chess service was unearthed, all of Europe hovers on the brink of the War of Greek Independence. Ali Pasha, the most powerful ruler in the Ottoman Empire, has angered the sultan and is about to be attacked by Turkish forces. Now he sends the only person he can rely upon—his young daughter, Haidee—on a dangerous mission to smuggle a valuable relic out of Albania, through the mountains and over the sea, to the hands of the one man who might be able to save it.

Haidee's journey from Albania to Morocco to Rome to Greece, and into the very heart of the Game, will result in revelations about the powerful chess set and its history that will lead at last to the spot where the service was first created more than one thousand years before: Baghdad.

Blending exquisite prose and captivating history with nonstop suspense, Neville again weaves an unforgettable story of peril, action, and intrigue.

Katherine Neville is the author of *The Eight*, *The Magic Circle* (a USA Today bestseller), and *A Calculated Risk* (a New York Times Notable Book). *The Eight* has been translated into more than thirty languages. In a national poll in Spain by the noted journal *El País*, *The Eight* was voted one of the top ten books of all time. Neville lives in Virginia and Washington, D.C.

www.katherineneville.com THE BLACK LAND

Wyrd oft nereth unfaegne eorl, ponne his ellen deah.

(Unless he is already doomed, fortune is apt to favor the man who keeps his nerve.)

-Beowulf

Mesa Verde, Colorado Spring 2003

BEFORE I'D EVEN REACHED THE HOUSE, I KNEW SOMETHING was wrong. Very wrong. Even though on the surface, it all seemed picture-perfect.

The steep, sweeping curve of drive was blanketed deep in snow and lined with stately rows of towering Colorado blue spruce. Their snow-covered branches sparkled like rose quartz in the early morning light. Atop the hill, where the driveway flattened and spread out for parking, I pulled up my rented Land Rover in front of the lodge.

A lazy curl of blue-gray smoke rose from the moss rock chimney that formed the center of the building. The rich scent of pine smoke pervaded the air, which meant that-although I might not be warmly welcomed after all this time-at least I was expected.

To confirm this, I saw that my mother's truck and jeep were both sitting side-by-side in the former horse stable at the edge of the parking area. I did find it odd, though, that the drive had not yet been plowed and there were no tracks. If I were expected, wouldn't someone have cleared a path?

Now that I was here at last, in the only place I'd ever called home, you would think I could finally relax. But I couldn't shake the sense that something was wrong.

Our family lodge had been built at about this same period in the prior century, by neighboring tribes, for my great-great-grandmother, a pioneering mountain lass. Constructed of hand-hewn rock and massive tree trunks chinked together, it was a huge log cabin that was shaped like an octagon-patterned after a hogan or sweat lodge-with many-paned windows facing in each cardinal direction, like a vast, architectural compass rose.

Each female descendant had lived here at one time or another, including my mother and me. . . . So what was wrong with me? Why couldn't I ever come here without this sense of impending doom? I knew why, of course. And so did my mother. It was the thing we never spoke about. That's why-when I had finally left home for good-my mother understood. She'd never insisted, like other mothers, that I come back for familial visits.

That is, not until today.

But then, my presence today hadn't exactly been by invitation-it was more of a summons, a cryptic message that Mother had left on my home phone back in Washington D.C., when she knew very well I'd be off at work.

She was inviting me, she said, to her birthday party.

And that, of course, was a big part of the problem.

You see, my mother didn't have birthdays. She'd never had birthdays.

I don't mean she was concerned about her youth or appearance or wished to lie about her age—in fact, she looked more youthful each year.

But the strange truth was, she didn't want anyone outside of our family even to know when her birthday was.

This secrecy, combined with a few other idiosyncracies—like the fact that she'd been in hermetic retreat up on top of this mountain for the past ten years, ever since . . . the thing we never spoke about—all went far to explain why there were those who may have perceived my mother, Catherine Velis, as a pretty eccentric duck.

The other part of my current problem was that I hadn't been able to contact my mother for an explanation of her sudden revelation. She'd answered neither her phone nor the messages I'd left for her, here at the lodge. The alternate number she'd given me was clearly not right—it was missing some final digits.

With my first true inkling that something was really wrong, I'd taken a few days off work, bought a ticket, caught the last flight into Cortez, Colorado, in a blizzard, and rented the last four-wheel-drive vehicle in the airport lot.

Now I left the engine running as I sat here for a moment, letting my eyes graze over the breathtaking panoramic view. I hadn't been home in more than four years. And each time I saw it afresh, it smacked the wind out of me.

I got out of the Rover in knee-deep snow and let the engine run.

From here on the mountaintop, fourteen thousand feet atop the Colorado Plateau, I could see the vast, billowing sea of three-mile-high mountain peaks, licked by the rosy morning light. On a clear day like this, I could see all the way to Mount Hesperus—which the Diné call Dibé Nitsaa: Black Mountain. One of the four sacred mountains created by First Man and First Woman.

Together with Sinaajinii, white mountain (Mt. Blanca) in the east; Tsoodzil, blue mountain (Mt. Taylor) in the south, and Dook'osliid, yellow mountain (San Francisco Peaks) in the west, these four marked out the four corners of Diné tah—"Home of the Diné," as the Navajo call themselves.

And they pointed as well to the high plateau I was standing on: Four Corners, the only place in the U.S. where four states—Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona—come together at right angles to form a cross.

Long before anyone ever thought to draw dotted lines on a map, this land was sacred to everyone who ever walked across it. If my mother was going to have her first-ever birthday party in the nearly twenty-two years I had known her, I could understand why she wanted

to have it here. Regardless of how many years she had lived abroad or away, like all the women in our family she was part of this land.

For some reason, I knew that this connection with the land was somehow important. I knew that was why she had left a message strange enough to bring me to this spot.

And I knew something else, even if no one else did. I knew why she'd insisted I come here today. For today-April fourth-actually was my mother, Cat Velis's, birthday.

I YANKED MY KEYS FROM THE IGNITION, GRABBED MY hastily packed duffle bag from the passenger seat, and plowed my way through the snow to our hundred-yearold front doors. These huge doors-two massive slabs of heart pine ten feet high, cut from ancient trees-were carved in bas-relief with two animals that seemed to be coming right at you. On the left, a golden eagle soared straight at your face. And from the right door burst an angry, upright female bear.

Despite the weathering of these carvings, they were pretty realistic-with glass eyes and real talons and claws. The early twentieth century had loved clever inventions, and this one was a doozy: If you pulled the bear's paw, her jaw dropped open to reveal very real and frightening teeth. If you had the nerve to stick your hand into her mouth, you could twist the old-fashioned door chime, to alert those within.

I did both and waited. But even after a few moments, there was no response. Someone must have been inside-the chimney was active. And I knew from practice that stoking that fire pit took hours of tending and a Herculean effort to haul the wood. But with our hearth, which was capable of receiving a log of fifty caliper inches, a fire could have been laid days ago and still be burning.

My situation suddenly dawned on me: Having flown and driven a few thousand miles, I was standing in the snow on top of a mountain, trying to get access to my own house, desperate to know if anyone was inside. But I didn't have a key.

My alternative-wading through acres of deep snow to peep through a window-seemed a poor idea. What would I do if I got wetter than I already was and still couldn't get inside? What if I got inside and no one was there? There were no car tracks, ski tracks-even deer tracks-anywhere near the house.

So I did the only intelligent thing I could think of: I yanked my cell phone out of my pocket and dialed Mother's number, right here at the lodge. I was relieved when her message machine picked up after six rings, thinking she might have left some clue as to her whereabouts. But when her recorded voice came on, my heart sank: "I can be reached at . . ." and she rattled off the same number she'd left on my D.C. phone-still missing the very last digits! I stood before the door, wet and cold, and fuming with confusion and frustration. Where did one go from here?

And then I remembered the game.

My favorite uncle, Slava, was famed throughout the world as the noted technocrat and author Ladislaus Nim. He'd been my best friend in my childhood, and though I hadn't seen him in years, I felt he still was. Slava hated telephones. He vowed he would never have one in his house. Telephones, no-but Uncle Slava loved puzzles. He'd written several books on the topic. Through my childhood, if anyone received a message from Slava with a phone number where you could reach him, they always knew it wasn't real-it must be some kind of encrypted message.

That was his delight.

It seemed unlikely, though, that my mother would use such a technique to communicate with me. For one thing, she wasn't even good at deciphering such messages herself, and she couldn't invent a puzzle if her life depended upon it.

More unlikely still, was the idea that Slava had created a message for her. As far as I knew, she hadn't talked to my uncle in years, not since . . . the thing we never spoke about.

Yet I was sure, somehow, that this was a message.

I jumped back up into the Land Rover and switched on the engine. Decrypting puzzles to locate my mother sure beat all hell out of the alternatives: breaking into an abandoned house, or flying back to D.C. and never learning where she'd gone.

I called her machine again: I jotted down the phone number she'd left there, for all the world to he...

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