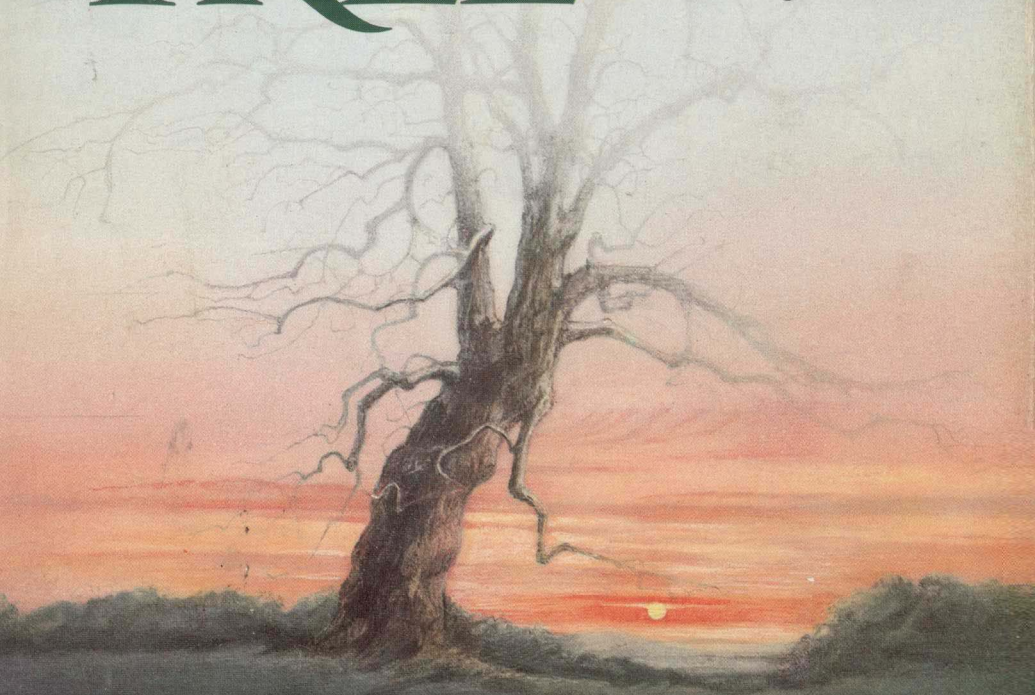


FLAMING TREE

*A Novel by the
Author of
Dream of Orchids*



PHYLLIS A.
WHITNEY

Flaming Tree



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I will long remember the beauties of the Monterey Peninsula, with its rocky seacoast, white sand beaches, and windshaped cypress and pine. I enjoyed the little town of Carmel, not only because it is unique, but because of its creative and friendly residents, who were generous in offering help and hospitality.

Margaret Pelikan of the Carmel Public Library and Dorothy Steven of the Monterey Public Library helped invaluablely with introductions and research materials.

I appreciated the hospitality offered by Michael Stanton of the Normandy Inn, where I stayed, and which appears in this story in another guise.

—Linda Rockwell became my “foreign correspondent,” sending me pictures of Nepenthe and other spots I had visited and wanted to write about, as well as answering endless questions. She also introduced me to Linda Stephenson, whose beautiful home in Carmel Highlands I adapted for my book.

Ann Yost’s enthusiasm and involvement with Robinson and Una Jeffers brought them excitingly to life for me at Tor House.

Here at home, Chuck Anderson, teacher, writer and filmmaker, loaned me books and counseled me on the creating of documentary movies.

While my settings are real, none of the characters in *Flaming Tree* exist outside of my imagination.

**For Edith Forsyth
Friend and counselor—a doctor
who has never needed “lessons”
in compassion.**

Flaming Tree

I

THE YOUNG BOY ran along the top of the cliff, teasing his mother, half in anger, half in fun. Behind him, where water cut a gash inland through granite, the Pacific roared, sucked in its breath, and roared again, sending rainbow spray high in the air.

“No, Jody—no!” The mother reached for her son, and he slipped away, laughing exultantly, the rim of the chasm much too close to his flying feet. When she reached him he tried to push her away—pushed with both hands, so that she stumbled backward, clasping him desperately at the same time. For an instant they clung together on the very edge, seeking for balance, and then disappeared, the boy still laughing as his mother screamed. The ocean’s voice covered all other sounds, and the warm California sun burned brightly down on the Point of the Sea Wolves.

A short distance away, behind a gnarled oak, a solitary figure, kneeling on the dry grass of this high sea meadow, watched the two vanish from sight, and after a stunned moment, rushed to the edge of the ragged gash above the ocean. The two hadn’t fallen into the water but lay far below on a ledge of rock where spray washed over them. Unmoving, mother and son were still clasped in each other’s arms.

When water retreated and left a moment’s quiet, the watcher (who until now had done nothing) called down to them: “Ruth! Jody!”

The two lay still as broken dolls. No one could survive a fall so terrible. It was better to let it end there. Better not to see, but to go quickly away, and be forever safe.

II

KELSEY walked along the white crescent of beach, carrying her sandals in one hand, a fine powder of sand slipping under her feet. She could taste the salt air, and its cool touch on her face seemed to calm her, stilling her unrest.

The early October sun had gone down in a flash of orange beneath lowering clouds that dulled the ocean. At this moment she needed only the beauty and peace of the scene around her, with no suffering—not her own nor that of others. Perhaps the loveliness of this Carmel beach would help to heal her, help the nightmares to stop.

She was a tall young woman in her early thirties, with straight brown hair cut feather-close to her head, shaping it nicely, even when it was blown by a breeze from the Pacific. Only a few years ago Kelsey Stewart had met the world with a wide, open look. Now, though her brown eyes still held the same direct and searching quality, there was a hint of wariness as well, and a loss of laughter that had once bubbled so readily.

Back home in Connecticut, she had often felt the joy of achievement, and sometimes the despair of failure. The children she'd worked with as a therapist had all suffered injury of some sort—at birth, or by accident, or even by suicide attempts. When nothing could be done, she grieved—too much. They'd warned her in school—those teachers who were skilled in working with the brain-injured—that she must not become too deeply involved with any one child, lest failure destroy her own ability to cope. She'd never managed to remove herself sufficiently, but

had gone right on caring. She had even imagined that she'd plumbed all depths of feeling and could take anything that might happen.

Not until that moment at the wheel of a car driving along a snowy highway from Connecticut to New York did she know what suffering could really be like. She'd been on the way to pick up her husband at Kennedy Airport. Carl Stewart was a sports announcer (failed athlete, in his case) and he was always off with some team, snatching time at home between games. There'd been no one to leave their son Mark with that day, so she'd brought him with her. At three he was a remarkably cheerful, energetic little boy, and she'd enjoyed having him beside her, strapped into his special seat.

At the crossroad, the patch of ice had been impossible for the other car to miss, and it had plowed straight into Mark's side. When Kelsey woke up in the hospital later, she didn't remember the crash. Carl was there, angry and condemning. They hadn't had much of a marriage for a long time, and only Mark had held them together. Mark, who was to grow up and become the successful sports star his father could never be. But Mark, with his clear blue eyes and shining smile, had died that night on a Connecticut highway. And for Kelsey, everything else had died with him. The fact that it was an accident meant nothing to Carl. He saw only that he had lost what was to be a vicarious second chance at the life he'd wanted.

Kelsey scuffed sand and went down to where an unhurried wave lapped coolly over her toes. If only she could stop weaving the threads of memory over and over. If only she hadn't taken Mark in the car that day. . . . It had happened two years ago, and some sort of healing should have begun. Perhaps if Carl had been a different man—a loving, supporting husband—she'd have begun to recover by now. Her own physical injuries were slight, and she'd mended quickly. But together with her terrible grief, Carl's bitterness over the loss of his son had been impossible to bear. Two months ago there'd been a divorce. She was free now to do what she wished and go where she liked. Wherever that was. . . .

Not to her parents in Florida. They'd wanted her to come, but she'd known that her mother would be a quivering jelly mass of sympathy and heartbreak, while her father would have held back his feelings stoically, though she'd have been aware that all the while he was blaming her for the loss of his only grandson no less than Carl had blamed

her. Then, a week or so ago, her mother's sister, Elaine Carey, had written a rather peremptory letter inviting her to come to Carmel and stay at the inn she owned. Kelsey had accepted in desperation. Aunt Elaine was as salty and bracing as a sea breeze, and her healthy, no-nonsense approach to life might help right now.

She had meant to visit Elaine's Manzanita Inn long before this, but somehow it was always her aunt who made the trip east and stayed briefly because she was eager to return to the town she had adopted. She'd made a real success of the inn she had opened ten years ago, and she could never stay away from it for long.

Kelsey had no private patients at the time, and she'd dropped everything to board a plane for California. She had been here for three days. Days of rest, of isolation, of seeing no one but her aunt, and sometimes Denis Langford, who assisted Elaine in managing the inn.

Carmel inns were distinctive and individual. The Manzanita presented its peaked roofs and half-timbered façade to Ocean Avenue, and wandered back in a series of rustic galleries, courtyards, and balconies that was endlessly fascinating and bewildering. There was always a waiting list of guests, so the rooms were full, but since Elaine's apartment was in a small cottage that was part of the complex, and had its own guest room, Kelsey could avoid the inn's comings and goings, and keep to herself. This she had managed to do until Elaine had chased her out this afternoon.

"Go down to the beach and blow the cobwebs away, Kelsey. It's time you took yourself in hand. As soon as you come to life I've got a job for you."

"Right now, I don't want a job," Kelsey said.

"I can see that. What you want is to wallow in your grief, enjoy your pain. But you're needed and sooner or later you'll revive. You're not really the wallowing type."

Elaine could be formidable when she chose, but Kelsey had resisted. She still felt too sore and lost to start living again. There was nothing to pull her back into life, and in a way it was better to feel numb and uncaring. This state was more comfortable than hurting all the time.

She turned back up the beach and waded through pools left by the tide, approaching the higher level of sand at the foot of Ocean Avenue. A cypress tree, its lower limbs bone-white in the graying evening, grew near the edge of pockmarked sand. The Monterey cypress and pine were wonderful trees, native to the peninsula. The cypresses, small and twisted, were bent by sea winds into strange shapes, while the pines

stood tall and straight, their green heads held high for seventy years or so.

“Hello, Kelsey.”

Startled, she looked around to see the man who sat in a low crotch of cypress branches, observing her, oddly unsmiling. Odd because whenever she'd seen Denis Langford at the inn, he'd been a cheerful man with a ready smile and easy laughter. He had a way with guests that seemed to please them, Elaine said, and she had encouraged Kelsey to talk to him. So far, not a successful effort.

Now he looked grave, and not very happy, so that her attention was caught. Lately she had begun to run from happy people.

“Wait a minute before you go back to the inn, Kelsey,” he said. “Sit down and let's talk a bit.” He gestured expansively toward the sand, still not smiling, his gray eyes searching her face in a curiously intent way. For the first time she glimpsed an underlying sadness behind what had always seemed his ready smile. She dropped down on the sand and began to put on her sandals.

“Did my aunt send you to soothe my troubled spirit?” she asked.

“I volunteered. Look, Kelsey, I know something of what's happened to you, and I know what you must be feeling.”

She rejected that quickly. “Nobody knows, and I don't want to talk about it.”

Denis Langford was a few years older than Kelsey—perhaps thirty-eight, though he'd seemed younger to her, much more like a youthful twenty-eight. Perhaps his fair hair gave him a younger look than might have been expected. He ran a hand through it now, smoothing back strands the wind had dropped into his eyes.

“Don't worry—I'm not going to talk about what's happened in the past. Either to you or to me. It's the present that scares the wits out of me. If you'll just stop being so damned aloof and standoffish for a moment—”

His words upset her. Until her aunt, and now Denis, no one had ever accused her of being standoffish, or uninvolved, and suddenly she didn't like what must be happening to her. She drew her knees up to her chin and watched him with the steady gaze that was sometimes disconcerting to others.

He managed a fleeting grin. “That's better. Now you're looking at *me*. The reason I said I knew what you must be feeling is because I've nearly been there myself—in a different way. In fact, I'm still there, just as you are, and the going is pretty rough.”

He was reminding her that other people had troubles, tragedies, and she knew she'd been too immersed in her own to care. For the past two years she had been able to throw herself only into her work with children—those whose need was desperate. She could still care about those who were young and lost and frightened. It was the problems of other adults she had wanted to push away. She sighed, waiting for Denis to go on.

"Your aunt wants you to meet someone—a woman who is coming to the inn in a little while. Coming to see you."

This sounded alarming. She knew that Elaine Carey liked to manipulate and arrange, and right now Kelsey didn't want anything to be arranged for her. Again she waited.

"I think perhaps you should say no to what your aunt wants of you."

That surprised her. He was taking a lot on himself for such short acquaintance. "Tell me why."

He left the tree and stood looking out along the crescent of Carmel beach toward a point of land that made a black protrusion into the sea. With the ocean calm, the sound of the waves was hushed, and there was a scent of woodsmoke on the air. An orange streak still stained the sky but the gray of evening was coming down.

Denis spoke over his shoulder, almost absently, as though he puzzled aloud. "Do you believe in good and evil? I mean as separate entities inside ourselves?"

"The demon and angel within?" she asked, finding his words disturbing. In her profession no one talked much about good and evil as such, and she felt a little self-conscious. "I don't think I've thought much about it."

"Neither have I until lately." He came to lower himself to the sand beside her, and let a handful of white grains dribble through his fingers. "It's the thing we do these days—we excuse those who behave badly. We let them off because of a miserable childhood, an unloving mother, a brutal father—whatever. Sometimes I wonder if the old religions didn't have a clearer idea—that evil really exists. That some men, some women, *are* wicked clear through—and very dangerous."

His words made her even more uneasy. "I'm not sure what you're talking about. I don't think this is an abstract conversation. Do you really know someone you think is evil?"

He flung away a handful of sand. "Maybe you shouldn't get involved in whatever Mrs. Carey asks of you."

Kelsey crossed her feet and rose lightly. It felt good to have her muscles under control, even though she'd neglected them lately.

"In that case," she said, "I'd better get back to the inn and find out what this is all about. Unless you'd like to tell me?"

He rose as easily, and she sensed in him an agitation that he made an effort to conceal. "You'll have to make up your own mind. But I'll warn you that it's a nasty situation. Anyway, I don't suppose it matters, really, because nothing can be done about the boy."

"What boy?"

"His name is Jody Hammond. He's my nephew, and he was nine a few months ago. But I'd better let your aunt tell you the rest."

As they followed the incline of Ocean Avenue, he fell into step beside her, and he seemed to draw his more usual, cheerful manner around him, submerging the intensity he'd shown on the beach.

"I wish I'd been here in Carmel's early days," he said. "The life would have suited me. It wasn't all that long ago—early in the century. These trees were planted down the center of this street because it used to rush with water and sweep everything away."

He had slipped easily back into the lighthearted host who enjoyed informing a guest. Kelsey listened with half her attention as he went on.

"Of course Carmel's trees are either glorious or notorious, depending on your viewpoint. If you're a visitor who's just tripped over an uneven sidewalk because trees have the right of way, you may not be enthusiastic about preserving their roots. But Carmel protects its trees lovingly, and sidewalks, streets, houses, all accommodate their presence, and go around where necessary. There's even a city ordinance that you can't sue for an injury if you were wearing high heels."

She wondered if he might be chatting on in this vein because he wanted to counteract his lapse into something he hadn't intended to discuss.

They turned down a side street that ran between the inn proper and the three cottages across the way. The architecture was fairytale whimsical—gingerbread houses with more peaked roofs, after the Carmel style.

"I'll leave you here and get back to the office," Denis said. "Just don't rush into anything, Kelsey."

"Thanks—I'll watch it."

She went up the short walk to her aunt's cottage and through an open door. The small sitting room had a California flavor, with touches of Spanish influence in the dark, carved furniture, and Indian motifs in

bright, handwoven rugs and hangings. A small woodburning fireplace offered warmth against chill evenings, with a stack of driftwood near the hearth. On a long, low bookcase stood a fanciful, armored knight, lance in hand—an imaginative Don Quixote wrought in tin.

Her aunt came into the room while Kelsey was staring at the knight. “A sculptor friend made him for me,” Elaine said. “He’s modeled after a huge old rusty statue that somebody once put up on a hilltop overlooking Big Sur.”

“Denis Langford came for me,” Kelsey said. “You wanted to see me?”

“Yes. I had a call. Ginnie will be here any minute, and I’d better tell you what the score is.”

Her aunt dropped onto the long sofa, and began to pluck absently at the blue lightning pattern. For once, she seemed not entirely at ease.

“Whatever it is,” Kelsey said, “I don’t want to get involved. Not yet. Please, Aunt Elaine, I need more time just to be let alone.”

“Of course, dear. I wouldn’t think of pushing you.”

But that was exactly what she intended, and Kelsey regarded her with loving exasperation. At fifty-six, Elaine was still a handsome, well-built woman, her silvery hair done in the upswept style of another decade, which nevertheless suited her well. She had authority, dignity, but not always a sense of humor. Kelsey watched her, still wary and on guard.

“About two months ago a terrible accident happened out at Point Lobos,” Elaine went on. “Ruth Hammond, the daughter of a dear friend of mine, had taken her nine-year-old son out there on a hike. Jody was always a mischief, and he was teasing his mother by running along a rocky cliff that dropped into the sea. She tried to stop him, and somehow they fell together. They were caught on a ledge just above the water, and they must have lain there for a long time before someone heard Ruth’s calls. They were taken to the hospital in Monterey, and Tyler Hammond, Ruth’s husband, came at once. Ruth and Jody were still alive, but that was about all, God help them. Ruth is Denis Langford’s sister.”

Kelsey listened, remembering Denis’s words, knowing that she must not let any of this reach that core of herself she now held remote, inviolable. Not because Denis had talked mysteriously about “evil,” but because she had no strength left for anyone else’s grief, however terrible.

When Kelsey asked no questions, Elaine continued. “Ruth can speak

and move her arms, and her mind is clear. The rest of her is helpless. The specialists who were called in say that Jody's brain damage is so severe he will never be anything but a vegetable. 'Chronic vegetative state' is the term they actually use. He's still in a coma, though after a month, Tyler brought his wife and son home from the hospital. Ruth's mother came up from Palm Springs to take care of her. Dora Langford has been my friend from way back, and she's had nursing experience. However, the boy needs full-time nurses around the clock. That's where Ginnie comes in.

"Ruth went to college with Ginnie Soong, and she asked her to come and take care of Jody. Ginnie's a good nurse, and she's been looking after him during the day for the last month. There seems to be no hope for his improvement, and it's a dreadful time for all of them. I went up to Carmel Highlands last week to see Dora and Ruth. Dora is terribly worried because Ruth has given up completely. If only Jody could be helped, perhaps she'd want to live again."

Kelsey still kept silent, trying to resist what she was hearing.

"Doesn't any of this reach you?" Elaine asked.

"I don't want it to reach me! I don't like the way I am now, but I can't bear any more, and there's nothing I can do." She heard the anguish in her own voice, and knew it was entirely for herself. She had nothing left of compassion for others. The last two years of trying had drained her.

Elaine went on in spite of Kelsey's resistance. "Tyler means to put his son in a nursing home up near San Francisco, where he can live out his years—whatever they are. Ginnie doesn't want this to happen, and she's talked to me about it. So I thought of you."

"But if the doctors are right, this may be the best solution, hard as it is."

Elaine went calmly on. "Ginnie will be here any minute, and she wants to talk with you. I told her I'd arrange it. So you must at least see her. She's an interesting person—Ginnie Soong. Her father owns a Chinese import company in San Francisco, and her mother helps in the shop and writes exquisite poetry on the side. As I said, Ginnie went to college near L.A. with Ruth Langford. She was her roommate, and even after Ruth married Tyler they kept in touch as good friends. Just before the accident, Ginnie had come to visit Ruth, and was in the Hammond home as a guest when it happened. I want you to listen to what she has to say. You can do that much, Kelsey."

She couldn't very well get up and walk out. "All right—I'll listen, but that's all. What about Mr. Hammond? How is he taking this?"

Elaine's hesitation indicated uncertainty. "Badly. He's a strange, gifted man—a brilliant man who never wears his feelings openly. I've never liked him very much, though I admire his work. He's written, directed, and produced some very fine documentary films, two of which have won awards. He's not working now, and I'm not sure he ever will again. Ginnie says he's withdrawn into himself, and he's holding everything back. Anger, grief, despair—he's closed himself off. He's lost both his wife and his son, and it would take someone pretty strong not to be destroyed. He *is* strong, but for now I think he's given up as much as Ruth has."

Kelsey knew very well that Elaine wasn't thinking only of Tyler Hammond's double tragedy. She was thinking of Kelsey's own loss as well. It was easy to see the wheels turning and to guess what her aunt's first purpose was going to be.

"There's nothing you can do about Mark or Carl," Elaine said. "That's all over and past. But Ruth and Jody Hammond are *now*. Perhaps something can be salvaged if the boy can be helped."

"Have you told these people anything about me?" Kelsey asked.

"Ginnie knows only that you've worked as a physical therapist." Elaine broke off and stood up. "Here she is now."

The young Chinese-American woman still wore her uniform, though without the cap of her nursing school. She came in briskly, and her dark eyes went at once to Kelsey, questioning, perhaps even challenging. Her black hair had been fluffed gently to frame a rounded face. Though she was small, she looked sturdy, and the hand she gave Kelsey offered a firm clasp. The effect she conveyed was one of pleasant, straightforward efficiency, so that it might be hard to refuse whatever this woman asked. Kelsey braced herself.

"How is everything up at the house?" Elaine asked.

Ginnie shook her head. "Not good. Tyler's made his arrangements to send Jody away, and Ruth has agreed. I think he believes it will be better for her when the boy is out of the house. She's seen him only a few times, when Tyler has carried her down to Jody's room, and each time she's been terribly ill afterward. She might feel better if only her mother or Tyler could get her to open up about what happened. She won't talk to me either."

"Ruth can't accept her own condition," Elaine said, "much less what the doctors say about Jody."

"Why haven't *you* accepted the doctors' opinions?" Kelsey asked Ginnie directly.

The nurse didn't hesitate. "Because I'm not sure they're right. They aren't God, you know. Coma isn't something with exact boundaries—it's a sort of catchall word when there's nothing else to use. Jody's eyes are open, but they don't track or follow anything. We simply can't tell for sure if he sees us, or if he understands anything. Just the same, I've had a feeling now and then that I had some sort of eye contact with him—that it wasn't just an empty look, but as though he saw me. I've tried all sorts of signals, of course, but there's no response. He can't blink as I've asked him to, or press my fingers, yet I still have a feeling that there's something there—that maybe his mind isn't a complete blank. If you could just come to see him, Mrs. Stewart—"

"What could I do that you can't?"

"You've had more experience with such cases. Tyler Hammond won't listen to me, but he might listen to you if you thought there was any hope at all. Mrs. Carey tells me you have healing hands—and that's something I believe in because I've seen it happen."

This was surprising, but Elaine nodded at her.

"Have you forgotten the time I did the rounds with you, Kelsey, in that nursing home where you were working with brain-damaged children? One of the nurses there used that phrase about you. She said the children responded to your touch and your voice."

"That's not very scientific," Kelsey said.

"Science!" Ginnie exploded passionately. "This is a small boy who needs help! There can be more to healing than some doctors realize. The rotten part is that Tyler's not going to give us a chance to find out."

"Why not?" Kelsey asked.

"He blames Jody for what happened. He wants him out of his sight."

A sudden stillness possessed Kelsey. A listening stillness.

Elaine said, "It's true, and it's dreadfully unfair. When Ruth was able to talk and give an account of what had happened out at Point Lobos, Tyler knew that Jody was to blame, and he made absolutely no allowances for a child's silliness and lack of judgment."

"Sometimes," Ginnie added more softly, "I almost think Jody senses how his father feels. Though the doctors say his brain is too badly damaged for him to understand anything."

"If he can understand anything at all, such treatment is terribly cruel!" Kelsey cried.

"Of course it's cruel," Elaine said. "That's why the boy needs help. I