



**FIGHTING
THE FLAMES**

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE

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Where there's smoke, Maddox jumps into the flames.

Maddox has been battling California's wildfires for years. As a smokejumper, he's trained to take action first and think second, but when he sees the cabin his best buddy owned before his death surrounded by a wall of fire, he can only think of his friend's widow.

Sydney came to the cabin to ready it to sell. The place holds too many memories for her peace of mind, and after three years of grieving, she's ready to take a deep breath and move on. But she can't do that smothered in her cabin.

When the smoke clears...

Maddox needs to evacuate the curvy vixen he has thought about too much since his friend's passing, but the stubborn woman won't leave. The team is short-handed, and she's determined to get hands-on training. Cutting, shoveling, digging—all those things should wear out a woman of her size, but she still has amazing stamina in his bed—as well as bent over logs and pinned against trees.

The smokejumpers aren't dropped into the danger zone with any water to fight the blaze, which is good because Sydney doesn't want to douse what she has with Maddox. The sexy firefighter is everything she could want in a lover, and his link to her past makes her feel what they have is real. Until they're back at base and no longer feeling the heat.

Maddox may never see her as more than his friend's widow, but Sydney believes this is more than a danger-zone fling.

Chapter One

“Thanks again for meeting me. There’s no point in both of us driving up to the cabin.” Sydney slid into the sedan and smiled at her realtor. The stodgy forty-something guy gave her a nod and smile. The man was doing her a real favor because going to the cabin alone left her hands icy and a sweat on her brow.

“Sure thing. Your property is in a prime location. Lots of hipsters moving into this area. They eat up these remote properties.”

Sydney relaxed against the leather seat and glanced in the side mirror at her own car parked at the rest stop. So many memories about to be resurrected—Rob had purchased this cabin as a surprise for her. The first time she’d seen it, the interior had been dotted with candles and a Valentine’s Day dinner set out on the table. She could almost smell the spices and taste the shrimp he’d prepared.

Her late husband had been a hopeless romantic, but she’d teased him about a firefighter—an elite smokejumper—setting all those fire hazards around the cabin.

Sydney folded her hands in her lap and drew a deep breath. Yes, overwhelming memories. Time to face them—and let them go.

After three years of grieving, she was ready to move on. Her life had been consumed by Rob’s death. She’d even quit her own job fighting fires in a small California town, unable to think of the man she loved succumbing to the flames. She hated her recent position at a company selling water filtration systems, but nothing was ever going to feel as right to her as fighting fires.

“Ms. Carter?” The realtor’s use of her name brought her from her thoughts, and she crash-landed in the car next to the stuffy little man once again.

“I’m sorry, what was that?”

“Sheldon Real Estate feels strongly about connecting the buyer with the seller. We believe people aren’t only buying the bricks and mortar—or in this case the logs and stone—but the feel of the people who lived there before them.”

She sank her teeth into her lower lip. Just what she needed. Was she supposed to tell him how she and Rob had made love all over the cabin, hoping to start a family that never got started?

“Well I didn’t exactly live here. I lived in the city, and Rob lived with me when he wasn’t on base. This was a sort of vacation home.” Many months of the year the California Smokejumpers were mandated to remain on a base, prepared to fly at the first alarm of a wildfire. When she would get time off work, they’d meet at the cabin. It was their love nest.

“I see,” Sheldon said, his tone revealing he really didn’t see at all. “But what I’m asking is a little history of the cabin and your lives together here.”

How the hell had she landed in this predicament? When she’d contracted Sheldon Real Estate to represent her home, she hadn’t realized he’d be digging up her memories with a fucking pick.

She glanced in the mirror again, but her car was long gone. There was nothing to do but stick this out and let him visit and photograph the cabin. She’d just keep her lips buttoned up on all things personal and try to keep her emotions locked up.

The man talked, and she looked at the familiar landscape. By the time they rounded Jake’s Bend and the rocks she and Rob had climbed so often came into sight, she was ready to forget the whole idea and turn around.

“What’s that?” Sheldon asked as they came out of another turn on the winding road.

Wafts of smoke blew on the breeze across the road. She sat forward and looked all around but couldn’t see a source. “I’m not sure. But the cabin’s just a mile ahead. I haven’t gotten any alerts on my phone about a fire in the vicinity, so we’re okay.”

No matter how much she tried, she couldn’t bring herself to stop listening to the US Forest Service alerts. Whenever she heard those tones, she said a silent prayer for Rob’s friends who were scrambling to get into their jump gear.

And for them to return home to their wives and families.

She dragged in a deep breath and caught the scent of burned wood coming through the car vents. She looked around again but couldn’t see anything. “Just up here. Make a right.”

Sheldon did, the car bumping down the long lane. When the trees cleared and Sydney set eyes on the four sturdy log walls of their quaint cabin, her throat closed off. She forced the tears stinging her eyes to recede as Sheldon parked the car. Then she sat for a long minute staring at the cabin.

She could nearly see Rob coming around the corner, long arms swinging, his big, hard body hot as hell in low-slung jeans and the soft plaid shirt he favored. The one with the elbow he'd patched himself.

He refused to throw it away, saying it was his lucky shirt. It hadn't been so lucky in the end. That limb had come down off the tree he was cutting in his effort to stop the fire, and that was it.

She fought a choking cry as she got out of the car. Her legs felt too wobbly to hold her, but she managed to walk up to the wood door and fit the key she held into the lock.

Swinging open the door nearly knocked her flat.

The place smells like Rob.

How was that possible, after all this time? She turned her face away from Sheldon so he didn't see her struggle. The last thing she needed was her crushed dreams broadcast to a hipster couple who was interested in buying the cabin.

"This is it," she said lamely.

Sheldon already had his camera out, snapping photos of the small living room that opened into the kitchen with the bar where Rob's friends would often come sit and have a beer. Blaze and Zander and Maddox. The crew.

She looked at the bar stools, memories of their broad shoulders creating a wall and their laughter echoing in her head.

She pushed out a breath and waited for Sheldon to stop snapping pictures from several sides of the room. Then he went into the kitchen to investigate. "Appliances all in working order?" he asked.

"As far as I know. I haven't turned them on for a while." Last time she'd come here, she'd cried through the task of finally packing up her and Rob's belongings and getting them out. But she'd left the framed photo of them on the nightstand in the bedroom. She couldn't quite bring herself to leave the cabin without any trace of the love they'd shared here.

Still, she was stronger now. Ready to move on. She hadn't dated, but she'd considered a few offers. She was thirty years old. She had a lot of life left. And she was lonely.

Banging ensued as Sheldon opened and closed doors and drawers. Then he vanished into the bathroom. She didn't need to follow and see the tiled shower that had been the source of so

much fun for her and Rob. But when Sheldon walked into the bedroom, she had to go with him. Compelled to guard the memories there.

He started snapping photos. Long windows facing the side of the property with the most trees. And the door that led onto a small deck they'd built the first spring here together.

She went to the nightstand and picked up the photo of her and Rob.

"You can leave that. It adds to the realism of the photos. Remember, I like to sell the story of the house and its inhabitants." He gave her a once-over, probably loving that out of habit she'd worn jeans, a sweater, and scarf, and some sturdy boots. She probably looked like the poster child of cabin living.

"No. This is private." She didn't look at the picture, just flattened it against her chest.

Then she went to the windows to look out.

As soon as she saw all the white in the air, she gasped.

Sheldon was at her side. "What is it? Deer on the property? I'd like a pho—" He broke off as he saw it too.

Heavy smoke. Flames licking their way up the hill from a distance, the path behind it charred and barren. How had they missed this? The fire was moving rapidly, the smoke just now reaching them on this higher point.

"Wildfire! Why didn't I get notification?" She fumbled with her phone and stared at the screen. Sure enough, there was a blinking message light. How had she missed the sound? She looked on the side of her cell and the little toggle switch was off. Maybe bumped when she'd put the phone in her pocket.

"We have to evacuate." Sheldon was out the door as fast as his shorter legs could carry him.

Sydney ran outside with him, terror seizing her chest. "I can't leave this place to go up in smoke."

He stopped on his way to his car. "Suit yourself, but I'm going." He got into his car, and without checking twice to see if she'd changed her mind, he spun gravel making his escape back to the main road.

Sydney stared at the flames destroying everything in their path and knew she couldn't really save the cabin.

Or herself.

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“Hoffman.”

“Here.”

“Sanders.”

“Present.”

“Blaze.”

“Where the hell would I go? We’re on lockdown until we get a call,” Blaze drawled, and laughter circled the group of guys.

“Maddox,” the base manager said.

“You’re looking straight at me, boss. I’m not a ghost.” Maddox got more comfortable with his feet propped on the desk in front of him and crossed his ankles.

“Just say you’re here, Maddox.”

He laughed. “Here.”

“Lincoln.”

“The hot Linc is ready to roll.”

More laughter.

The boss opened his mouth to call more names but was cut off by an official voice and an alarm. “US Forest Service has reported a wildfire ten miles southeast of Jake’s Bend.”

Jake’s Bend. So close to Rob’s cabin.

Maddox didn’t stick around to hear more details. He and his team were on their feet and running for their gear. They had about five minutes to suit up and get in the air.

Adrenaline rushed through his veins as he stepped into his suit. The padding on one leg was twisted, and he took a second to right it. Landing in a tree wasn’t in his game plan today, but you could never be too safe.

“After being stuck inside playing cards, I’m glad for a call,” Blaze said from next to him.

“Me too. I can’t afford to lose any more money to you.” Maddox was ready first and strode toward the exit. The plane was ready, the boss grim-faced.

“Don’t let the location get to you, Maddox.” He clapped him on the back.

“I won’t.” Act first, think later. He had to do his job and not worry about the property that was right in the line of fire.

He took his seat on the plane, and the guys all filled the place to bursting.

“Hey, Maddox. You’re taking up too goddamn much room,” Lincoln said as he crammed himself beside him. “I thought you were on a diet.”

They had to keep their weight down for flight regulations, and Maddox naturally weighed more. He dieted and trained year round to keep jumping into the danger zones and do what he loved.

He flipped Lincoln the bird, and the door shut. The hum of the engine didn’t kill the chatter of the guys who’d been locked up too damn much together. They were all outdoors people. They got cabin fever being stuck on base, but waiting was part of their jobs too.

As the plane got up to the right elevation, Maddox tried to focus on his jump and not the details. For two minutes he had to be the best damn jumper. Once he was on the ground, then he’d work on being the best damn firefighter.

It had been three years since they’d lost Rob Carter, but when he was in the air like this, he always thought of his friend. If he were here, he’d be cracking jokes and making them all laugh right before they jumped.

Maddox had never been one to dispel tension the way Rob could, and Lincoln seemed to have become the jokester since Rob’s death.

Holding out his fist to the guys, Maddox looked from man to man. He loved his crew like brothers, and each time they did this, there was a risk that one might not come back with them alive.

“Brothers,” Maddox said.

“Brothers,” Lincoln echoed, bumping fists with him.

All the guys followed, and Maddox felt a little lighter. He was ready.

“Maddox,” the spotter called him to the door of the plane.

He heaved himself and all his gear to his feet—they dropped in with enough for a couple days’ worth of food and water, as well as a sleeping bag and their tools. He positioned himself in the doorway and stared out.

The fire was visible, leaving a black void in its path. And he spotted the opening in the trees where he was supposed to land.

“Ready!” the spotter called.

Maddox gripped the edges of the open door. When he felt the slap on his back, he leaped.

The first second was chaos, the wind in his ears and knocking him around. Then he stabilized and floated in a sweet silence so unreal that it seemed like an unlikely prelude to the job he was about to do. He often thought of this quiet moment as the time to reflect on the important things in his life.

His job, his crew. His parents safely back in Oregon and his brother just about to have a new son.

Maddox hit the ground and crumpled. In a blink he was on his feet and gathering in his chute. Lincoln did a tuck and roll ten feet from him.

“Watch your lines don’t get tangled up with mine.”

“Hell, Maddox. Let a man get on his feet before you tell him off.”

He turned to look in the direction of the cabin. As much as he tried not to think of the place turning to ash, he couldn’t shake the feeling of dread.

It wasn’t likely that Sydney would be there. As far as he knew, she hadn’t come back since Rob’s death. He’d heard she’d quit her job fighting fires in town, unable to do the work they’d had in common. But Maddox had to make sure.

He waved his hand toward the cabin. “I’m heading east.”

“Gimme a second to roll up my chute and I’m right behind,” Lincoln said.

Maddox hoisted his gear more securely on his back and took off walking, drawn as if by an invisible rope.

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Sydney crouched and checked the wet towel she’d rolled and crammed into the space under the front door. Still plenty wet. It wouldn’t keep out a fire, but it would stop more smoke from filling the space.

In her head, she chanted over and over. *Please find me. Please check the cabin. Please find me.*

And for leaving her, may that asshole realtor drive right into the belly of the fire. If given another minute to think about her options, she would have run to the car. And what kind of man left a woman stranded without a vehicle in the middle of a wildfire, anyway?

She clutched the photograph of her and Rob tightly to her chest and stared out the window. The wall of smoke was coming. How long before the whole cabin would become a smoker and she’d lose oxygen?

The jumpers were on the ground by now—she knew the crew. They were already cutting trees to stop fueling the fire. Making a firebreak that would trap the flames.

But they were nowhere near the cabin. She'd hear the saws if they were.

“Please,” she whispered, bouncing on her toes. Her phone still worked, and she'd called out for help. She held her breath, waiting to see a man fall out of the sky to rescue her, but she might stop breathing before that happened.

The smoke wall approached at an alarming rate. She didn't even have a garden hose up here anymore. All she had was a photograph and some of the towels she'd used to block the openings.

And my wits. I can find a way out. I have to.

She went to the small kitchen and started rifling the drawers looking for anything she could use as a firefighting tool. Hell, even a spatula that Rob had used to turn the burgers on the grill when the guys came over was better than nothing.

But the place was empty.

She hardly remembered clearing it out so well, and when she'd gotten back to town, she'd stuffed all the boxes into a storage shed and forgot about them.

She returned to the window. Panic made her heart squeeze so hard that she cried out. She was going to die here.

And she wasn't ready.

She wanted to live again—that was her point in coming here with the realtor. She wanted to move on with her life. Maybe find love and start a family. The thought of never having those things made her ache all the more for them.

“Please. Someone come help me,” she whispered. Maybe it was a prayer or maybe she was begging Rob for help. Either way, something had to happen—fast.

Smoke was billowing toward the windows now, but she couldn't yet see the flames. She knew what to do to survive for a little while, but eventually she'd succumb to smoke inhalation.

Tears spilled over the rims of her eyes, and she could barely see the trees that would be engulfed.

A thump sounded.

Trees falling?

She ran to the door just as it burst inward. A huge man filled the doorway, his face hidden by the helmet and mask he wore. But she knew that man.

“Maddox!”

He stepped inside and slammed the door behind him, enclosing him in the cabin with her.

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“Jesus Christ, Sydney, why are you here?” He took a step in her direction, his chest tight at the view of her tear-tracked face and the raw fear in her eyes. “We’ve gotta get you out.”

“We need to save the cabin first. Who’s with you? Get your saw!” She skirted him to leave.

“Fucking hell. You can’t fight this. Stay here.” He glanced down at his feet and the sopping towel there. “Put that back under the door and don’t come out until you hear the saws stop.”

Her eyes were wide, bluer than blue, and made his gut clench. She raked her fingers through her long hair, swooping it back off her pale, oval face. Golden brown hair, like caramel. At Rob’s funeral, she’d worn it in a twist on the back of her neck, and Maddox had ached just looking at her and knowing her pain.

“Hurry, Maddox!”

He speared her in his gaze and gave a nod. “Use that towel like I told you.” Then he disappeared outside.

So much for act first and think after. Saving people from wildfires was his job, but he wasn’t only thinking of getting Sydney out of there alive. No, he was thinking of wrapping her against his chest and protecting her. Of smelling her hair and seeing those big blue eyes blurred with pleasure.

“Fuck!”

Lincoln and two others were on the ridge, slicing through trees like butter. Mowing them down to create a bigger fire safety zone around the cabin. Rob had been smart about it in the first place and cleared much of the lot, but they still had their work cut out for them.

Maddox fired up his saw and started cutting, throwing looks back at the cabin to ensure Sydney hadn’t come outside. His biggest fear was her getting her cocky firefighter’s hat on and attempting to help them. Without the right tools or gear, she

would only put herself in danger. He'd never be able to work knowing she wasn't protected.

“Dammit.” His curse was lost in the sound of a tree striking the earth. The fire roared. And inside him, a new fire kindled.

One that he needed to fight with everything in his being.

Because he could not—ever—let his attraction to Sydney show.

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