



Tempting
the Flames
Where There's Smoke 2

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Chapter One

Scarlett's heart slammed so hard against her ribs that it robbed her of breath. Through the lens of her video camera, she focused on the little figures falling out of the sky.

"When are they opening their chutes?" Her voice sounded too nervous for her own ears. If she was going to film this documentary on the California Smokejumpers, she needed to put on her warrior girl bra and panties because she was going to need to toughen up. She had a month with a group of firefighters who jumped out of a plane with everything they needed strapped to their persons, and so far, she couldn't even watch them jump without feeling dizzy.

At her side, Joe, the base camp manager for the team, shot her a wry smile. "They'll deploy their chutes soon enough."

Just then, several popped open and the small figures were tugged upward by air currents.

"Wow." Scarlett smiled from behind her camera as she filmed them floating down, down, like dandelion fluff on the wind.

"Stand back along the edge here," Joe instructed. "We'll want to give them a big landing zone, though they're often pretty accurate."

"Do any ever land in the trees?" She glanced away from the lens in time to see the forty-something, rugged guy wince.

"Had two landing accidents last year. Not bad, but I'm hoping for a better track record this season. It's why we're practicing our jumps so often these days."

"How do they steer themselves?"

"By moving the lines of their parachutes."

Her palms began to sweat as a figure loomed closer and closer until his feet hit the ground.

"See how he's got his knees together and bent? Makes for a softer landing," Joe said as the guy rolled onto his side and came up grinning. He didn't

hesitate a moment before he started coiling in his parachute. In seconds he had it stuffed away and was pulling objects from his fire suit.

“These men and women need to be ready to hit the ground running.” Joe cupped his hand around his mouth and hollered to the others touching down on earth. “You’ve got only about a minute, jumpers! Haul ass if you don’t want toilet duty when we get back to base!”

Several huffs of laughter sounded, but Scarlett heard the threat in Joe’s tone. The manager was as serious as a heart attack when it came to his crew and running a tight ship. She’d spoken to him at length before persuading him to allow her to make this documentary for her dissertation.

She was a step away from receiving her doctorate in environmental sciences. The step seemed rather big to her, because it meant living, eating, and breathing smokejumpers for the next month. Before now, she’d believed she was prepared.

As the guys strode toward her and Joe, faces fierce with something she recognized as determination, more adrenaline hit her system.

Big guys and roped with muscle, judging by the rolling way they walked. She swallowed hard and forced herself not to take a step back.

She spent her days in the library. For fun she had geek-a-thons of Firefly and Harry Potter. She was far from her element out of doors, surrounded by men who harnessed the power of wildfires.

She glanced up, her gaze traveling what seemed like forever over powerful thighs, a broad chest, and thick shoulders. She stopped breathing altogether. Maybe the last time her heart had knocked, it had finally given out. Because surely she was looking at a god.

Or archangel. He wore a wicked smile and a gleam in his eyes to match.

One by one, the guys all gathered around Joe. “Great practice jump, guys. You’re lucky you didn’t screw up, because that was all caught on tape.” He extended his hand toward her. “Meet Scarlett Simpson, doctoral student at Berkeley. She’ll be one of us for the next month as she films a documentary featuring all of you.”

“Oh shit. I didn’t do my hair this morning,” one guy joked, scrubbing his fingers through his messy locks.

He still looked good to her. She felt a little shell-shocked. She was around a lot of nerds and professor types, but her hormones always raged around men who worked hard for a living.

Feeling all those eyes on her, she threw a little wave. “Hi, everyone. I look forward to working with you all.”

“Can we suit her up, boss? If she’s one of us, she needs to know how much these suits weigh,” another man from the back ribbed.

A woman stepped to the side, freeing herself from the bulk of testosterone. When Scarlett’s gaze lit on hers, Scarlett felt an immediate camaraderie. “Women can handle the gear load with as much ease as a man.”

“Uh oh, Maddox, your woman’s getting feisty again.”

A hunky guy hooked his arm around her shoulders and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “We all know you’re bad-ass, Sydney.”

Scarlett’s interest piqued. She’d read a lot about smokejumpers before coming to base, but she didn’t know that relationships were allowed. She made a mental note to speak with the couple as soon as possible. In her mind’s eye, she could already see the final footage of their story, how two people were so passionate about their jobs and worked together as well.

“Stick with me, Scarlett. I’ll show you the ropes.” Sydney grinned. Then she and Maddox peeled off from the others and started walking back to the building.

Joe touched her sleeve. “I’ll let you do your thing. I won’t get in your way unless it’s going to impair my jumpers.”

She gave him a grateful smile. “Thank you. You’ve been very hospitable.”

“Blaze, show the lady the way back to the base and find her a room in the family quarters.” Their base had a separate area for those families who came to visit the smokejumpers during the long fire seasons when they were locked down on base.

She searched the group for the man Joe referred to. When the archangel she'd ogled earlier stepped forward, her stomach dropped out.

His gaze clashed with hers, and damn if her body didn't react. She felt all hot and sweaty, and very close to stuttering like a teenager again.

Drawing her shoulders back, she looked him in the eyes. Very bright, liquid eyes, pools of green reflecting the forests he saved from fires.

When he stuck out his hand, she stared at it a beat too long, drinking in how big and rough his fingers looked. Would they feel that way, too? She should find out—by actually shaking the hand he offered.

She placed her hand in his and he gripped her fingers. Another body part, much lower, clenched at the feel of his skin against hers. "I-I'm Scarlett."

His crooked smile was better than the cream filling of an Oreo on PMS week. She melted into a puddle as he stared into her eyes.

She lifted a hand to push up her glasses, which she wasn't wearing. Too stupid. A flush rose in her cheeks.

"Blaze."

Yeah, that's what her cheeks were doing. Blazing.

It took her a second to realize that was what he was called.

"Do you have another name?"

His grin broadened, quirking the other side of his mouth upward, to devastating effect. "Ryan Steele, but I never hear that name when I'm here."

"So if I call you by that, you won't come running?"

He still held her fingers, the warmth seeping deep into her bones and spreading. As he looked into her eyes, he said, "Oh, I think if you're doing the calling, I'll come."

*

Blaze was pretty sure his mind had flown out his ear somewhere around 9000 feet. Flirting wasn't really his gig, and he definitely never pulled out his tricks while on base.

But there had never been such an intriguing woman standing before him either.

Scarlett was one of those lithe women with graceful limbs. A Grace Kelly misplaced in time, wearing skinny jeans and a simple navy top that flattered her small, perky breasts and accentuated the long column of her throat.

Her warm brown hair was windblown, the front pieces twitching across her forehead. But her eyes...deep hazel, more amber than anything. She had a delicate look to her, and he wondered how she'd survive the next month with their rough lot.

"You can call me Blaze," he said quietly, releasing her hand before he did something stupid like run his thumb down the side of hers. Her skin was silky, which urged him to press her hand flat to his chest.

He took a step back. "C'mon. I'll show you around."

Her video camera was rigged with a neck strap, and she let the weight rest just below her breasts against her chest. He flipped his gaze from it to her face but saw no sign of it being too heavy for her.

She did look delicate, easily broken. When she started walking at his side, though, her strides were long and sure.

"So tell me how long you've been here, Blaze." She shot him a sideways look.

"Four years. I always knew I wanted to be a jumper. Fought my share of fires in my youth."

She arched a long brow. "Volunteer firefighter?"

He chuckled. "No, I was a bit of a pyromaniac. My poor mom was always ready with a fire extinguisher." A small pang hit him. He'd lost his mother at fifteen.

Shock skittered across Scarlett's face.

He laughed again. "You didn't grow up with brothers, did you?"

"No, I'm an only child."

"Don't worry. I didn't cause any deaths or loss of property. Well I might have burned up a platoon of plastic Army guys, but I swear it was an accident!"

Her face softened, and a feminine laugh escaped her. The sound made him look at her closer. What was it that drew him? She was pretty, yes, but the better word to describe her was *interesting*.

Glancing away, he pointed out the buildings on base. “Supply shed, the hangar, and of course, the jumpers’ quarters. The family quarters sits behind the building.”

She nodded, turning her head to scan the landscape. It was dry as hell right now, and he was surprised that they hadn’t had any fire activity in the last three weeks they’d been here. If they didn’t get a call soon, though, the guys would start getting a case of the cooped-ups.

“What’s that little building?” Scarlett asked.

He swung his gaze back to her face even though he could have easily answered without looking at her. This time he noted a delicate mole beneath her brow. “That’s the smokehouse. It’s a little hobby of ours. We get some meat—beef, pork, chicken, even turkey and sometimes quail—and smoke it. Some of the guys are experimenting with injecting it with those flavorings before they smoke it.”

“Hmm. Sounds different.”

He looked at her more closely. “You’re a vegetarian, aren’t you?”

She tucked her lower lip in and then released it before he got a chance to study a dimple that appeared on her chin. “Why would you ask that?”

“Doctor of environmental science.”

“That equals tree hugger, right?” Her tone was light, not at all offended.

“Doesn’t matter if you are. We’re all tree huggers here.”

“Guess you are.” She gave a soft laugh that burrowed under his skin and stuck there like a splinter he should pick out. But this time he wanted to leave it alone and take a closer look at it later.

Uh oh. He was doing it again. After his mother’s passing, he’d been raised by an unemotional father, which only made Blaze seek relationships early. He hopped from girl to girl in high school. Even though he wanted to marry one of them until he found out she’d been sleeping with his buddy.

He knew the signs in himself. It had been a long time since he'd had a regular woman in his life, and that same deep longing for a bond rose up.

He pushed it back down and quickened his pace. Scarlett kept up with him, her strides effortless though she had to take two steps to his one.

"Let's find you a bunk. Where's your gear?" he asked.

"Uh, I left it inside the door of the base. Joe said he had jumpers in the air and we had to hurry to see them."

Blaze raised his brows. "So you just got here."

She nodded.

"I'll grab your bag and we can swing back to the family quarters."

"You don't have to. I can get it."

"Please, my momma raised me to open doors and carry things for women."

A sweet smile curled her lips, bringing his attention to the upper bow. The bumps were slight, delicate like the rest of her. And entirely kissable.

He dragged in a deep breath to center himself.

"Tell your mother she did a good job," Scarlett said.

He stopped walking and met her gaze. "My mother passed away when I was fifteen."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Her blush was back, about two thousand candles hotter than the last one. Something tugged in his chest, seeing her so discomposed, and he sought to ease her. He placed a hand on her forearm.

Shit, that was worse. She burned hotter and looked away.

"It's all right, Scarlett. Let me just grab your bag." He released her arm and fisted his hand to keep the feel of her skin close. Whatever was wrong with him, he'd better get a damn grip, and fast.

He went into the building, where the guys were busy stripping off jump gear and repacking chutes. He spotted Scarlett's bag right away. Unmistakable with the Berkeley sticker on the outside.

"Hey, Blaze, wanna play some five card stud?" Lincoln called.

"Yeah, in a few. Getting the guest settled."

"We'll deal you in."

“Don’t start without me. You all cheat.” He threw his buddy a grin and went back outside with two bags in hand.

Scarlett jogged up to him. “Please, at least let me take one. You’re already wearing all that gear.”

He gave her the lighter of the two, having learned never to argue with a woman. Then they went to the family quarters where she’d be staying.

“This is nice,” she said. He looked around the space, seeing what she did. Expansive main room where families could gather, a long table with benches similar to the one in the main building. Long windows looked out onto the training field, and the little kids loved to press their noses to the glass and wave as the jumpers jogged by several times a day.

“Yeah, they like the families to be comfortable when they’re here. Maddox and Sydney share one of the rooms in the back, but I’m sure you’ll have your privacy.”

She gave a short laugh. “After sharing a house with four other girls for the past five years of my life, privacy isn’t high on my list of needs.”

That short word hit his brain and sent it spinning like the blades of a helicopter. *Needs. What are your needs, Scarlett?*

Hell, even her name invoked lurid thoughts in him. He seriously had to get some time alone and release some of his pent-up sexual energy. He couldn’t be distracted from his job, and Scarlett’s attention was fixed on her documentary.

They placed her bags down, and she settled her hands on her narrow hips. “Let’s get back to the others. I want to start interviewing everyone.”

“Sure thing.” As they strolled back to the main building, he gathered his rampant thoughts close once more.

He felt a little off-kilter today, probably because of thoughts of his mother. That led to memories of everyone else he’d lost young—an aunt, two cousins, a childhood buddy who’d had a rare cancer. Lots of tragedy in his life, but Blaze never dwelled on the losses for long. Life was short, and he grabbed it by the balls and wrestled it into submission.

This mindset had driven him to a career in smoke jumping. After the losses in his life, he had a lot of experience with finding order in disasters, and he did the same with wildfires.

Once inside, Scarlett thanked him and broke off to speak with Joe. Then she set up a small area on a back table with her camera on a tripod. Blaze went to the card table, where the guys had dealt him in and were busy slinging bullshit.

“Dude, my pecker’s so long, I keep it strapped to my thigh when I jump so it doesn’t fling around,” Lincoln said, sipping a bottle of water.

Laughter erupted at their table and the nearest one too. “You wish,” Zander responded, picking up his cards now that Blaze had taken a seat.

“Why do you think they call me Hot Linc?”

“Shhiiiiit,” Pitt drawled, spitting a sunflower seed into an old coffee can. “I’ve worked with you for years and never once have I called you Hot Linc.”

“That’s because you haven’t seen it yet.”

Pitt chuckled. “I’ve seen the junk of every man in this place. Hell, I’ve even seen Sydney stripped down to her underwear. Only person I haven’t seen is our guest.” He twitched his head toward the back of the room.

Blaze followed the movement. Scarlett sat primly upright, writing in a notebook, her hair tucked behind one ear.

“Unlikely you will see her in less clothes than she’s got on now,” Zander said.

“Why’s that?” Blaze couldn’t help but ask.

All eyes fell on him. “Librarian type.”

Lincoln twisted to get a better look at Scarlett. Then he faced the group again. “She’s not wearing glasses.”

No, but Blaze would bet money that she had a pair. He’d noted the telltale way she’d pushed up a set of specs that weren’t there.

Librarian type, he mused. She fit that image, and it was odd that he’d looked at her twice. He was a bold guy and typically dated bold women.

When she got up from the table and took a few steps toward Rawly and Jackson, Blaze stopped listening to the bragging rights over whose package was bigger and watched Scarlett.

She spoke so quietly that he couldn't hear her, but the guys looked up with smiles and nods. Rawly unfolded his long legs from the table bench and went with Scarlett to the interview space she'd set up.

The other guys at Blaze's table were looking her direction too.

"Man, that guy's wasting away. She should ask Rawly on a date to the all-you-can-eat buffet," Zander said, running his fingers along his ruddy auburn beard.

"He could use a coupla meals," Lincoln added.

"He's just a thin guy. He's got enough weight on him to jump, and that's all that matters." Blaze tore his gaze from Scarlett and stared at the cards.

They all looked to him. "Bet you wish you had his frame, don't you, Blaze?" Lincoln asked.

"I can't help it I pack on muscle like I do." He had to be careful with his diet, because he built muscle like an ox who pulled carts all day. The rule was a jumper must stay under two hundred pounds, and Blaze battled that daily, having a natural weight of two-ten. He worked his ass off to keep it down, running and training several hours a day. For him, it was like being a wrestler battling to stay in his weight class.

"I hear it's taco night, too," Zander teased with a smack on Blaze's shoulder that would have rocked most other men.

"Is it Monday already? Meximus Prime?" Lincoln sat forward eagerly. They all loved the huge selection of Mexican food they could order from the local bar.

Blaze grunted. "I'll just run a couple extra miles."

His gaze slid past Lincoln and across the room to Scarlett. She spoke with Rawly, referring to her notes occasionally and scribbling. Once in a while, she'd look through the camera lens as if to ensure he was still in frame though nobody had moved a muscle.

A woman who paid attention to details. Who didn't get caught up in the trappings of makeup and jewelry. Yet she was stunning.

As she ran her tongue over her lower lip, she swung her head up to catch Blaze staring. She retracted her tongue into her mouth and clamped her teeth onto the plump flesh.

Blaze groaned.

He was going to need that private time quicker than he'd thought.

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