HEAT SHEET FORCE KATE BURNS Into the Heat

Phaze

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Into the Heat a Phaze Force HeatSheet by Kate Burns

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Also by Kate Burns

Halfpipe Romance

Love Lessons

Canyon's Call

Chapter One

"I've got the duty assignments for the next fourteen."
Beck's heavy steel toe work boots sent a spray of gravel
flying as he stopped beside the repair bench in the open-air
shed. His eyes scanned the papers on the clipboard he held in
his work-scarred hand for a moment before he cleared his
gravelly voice and said, "Delia, you and Coop are assigned to
the north ridge station. Usual drill ... brush clearing and
piling, facility and trail maintenance. You don't need me to tell
you what to do, you've done this before."

"When do you want us there?" Cooper asked, his words giving no hint to the way he felt about the assignment.

Already turning to leave, the facility manager stopped, his feet sending a new wave of grit around their ankles. His gaze swept over the two standing before him, their hands and tools stilled over their chainsaws. A muscle worked in the man's jaw, moving the maze of wrinkles around his eyes and on his forehead in small patterns while he openly appraised them. For a moment Delia thought he had something to say, something that he wanted to give voice to but couldn't bring himself to do. In the end, Beck shrugged his massive shoulders and said, "Up to you. Duty begins tomorrow. If you can pack your gear in time you can head up there tonight. If not, first thing in the morning."

Cooper said, "I can be ready tonight." "So can I."

Fourteen days. Two whole weeks. Alone. In a remote cabin in the middle of nowhere with Cooper Tallman.

Things could be worse.

It only took twenty minutes to pack her duffel and head out to the large black SUV but Cooper was there before her, his duffel packed into the cargo area beside an assortment of tools and foodstuffs. Delia tucked her bag beside his, closed the cargo door, and walked around to the passenger side. Climbing in beside him, she caught a whiff of the bar-and-chain oil they'd been using on their chainsaws before Beck found them. Not sure if it came off her or him, she let the edges of her lips curl upward.

Yeah, that'll curb any man's appetite for romance. The scent of oil, smoke, pine tar, and all the other less-than-feminine aromas that surround us. Not that this guy allows himself any appetites other than the ones that roar hotter than any I've got to offer. If Cooper's got a taste for anything romantic—with anyone, anywhere—he keeps it to himself.

"What's so funny?" he asked, shooting her a sideways glance as they pulled onto the black ribbon of pavement that they would use to get to the station. It wound through thousands of acres of forest in some of the remotest areas of the state and was used exclusively by the wild land firefighters. "Did I miss something?"

The grin grew as she shook her head. "Nothing, really. I guess I'm just happy to be going up to the north ridge. It's always been one of my favorites."

It was true. Nestled high on the ridge, the station looked more like a resort than an outpost for firefighters. A breathtaking view of the wooded valley gave it a prime advantage in that smoke could be seen for miles in all directions. There was also a small lake not far from where the station had been built, providing not only a good supply of emergency water but also a cool place to swim in the hot summer months.

"Mine, too," Cooper said, turning his eyes to the road. The woods were filled with the usual variety of animals and they both knew that they could just as easily find a black bear in standing before them as a red squirrel. With dusk approaching, the chance of animal movement increased substantially. Although it was still fairly light, Cooper turned on the headlights and slowed. "I'm glad we could make the trip now. Thanks for being ready to leave right away. It's better, I think, to get the drive over with tonight. That way we can get an early start tomorrow."

"No problem. I'm just glad you wanted to leave so soon. I felt my heart lurch when I heard the words. It's been too many months since I've been up there and pulling this duty is like winning the lottery for me."

Delia spoke from her heart. Their often stressful work conditions left no room for concealment. Speaking candidly to one another was one of the things they expected—and got. There was still a place for privacy, but if a topic was open to discussion or a question asked, the nature of the job demanded an honest response.

Otherwise, how could they depend on each other for their very lives when the flames surrounded them? Honestly bred trust, and trust meant the difference between life and death in a smoke jumper's world.

Chuckling, Cooper steered around a family of raccoons who sat at the edge of the lane. They gave the vehicle and its occupants a set of ring-eyed stares as they passed, looking indignant at the intrusion on their early evening stroll.

"I think we may have annoyed them," he said. "Did you see the way the big one glared at me?"

"I did. They'll get over it."

They rode for a while in silence. As the darkness grew closer, Cooper said, "You're like that about a lot of things, I've noticed."

What are we talking about? Now I've missed something, I think.

"Excuse me?"

"It's just that I've noticed that you seem to get over things easily yourself. I mean, when the chain broke on the shredder yesterday you didn't bat an eye, you just went ahead and got a replacement chain. Last week there was that time the Internet access went down. John told me you were in the middle of e-mailing your sister, weren't you?"

I was e-mailing her. I was asking about her new baby and her idiot drunk of a husband. Why Casey thinks she needs that fool is beyond me but hey, it's her life, not mine. I wouldn't live with him, though. Not for anything.

"That's right. The damn connection quit just as I was about to press send—a real case of crappy timing if ever there was one."

"My point exactly. All of these things would have completely riled someone else, yet you ... I don't know. You just seem to be able to move forward without getting angry or upset about anything. Great quality, I think." Cooper's voice was as conversational as it would have been if they were discussing the weather. His nonchalance made his words even more complimentary as far as she was concerned. It was as if he took her character traits for granted, as if her even-temperedness was something he'd observed, made note of and came to expect. And that casual assessment sent a thrill through her.

"Thanks, Cooper. It doesn't seem like it helps any to get pissed off. I've always felt it's better to simply pick up, dust off and move forward," Delia scanned the trees bordering the asphalt for signs of movement. It was something she did for safety's sake—as well as her own. Not trusting the growing gloom to hide the flush creeping up her throat and across her face, she kept her face averted. But she made no attempt to suppress the grin that rose from within her.

The rest of the ride to the station was made without further conversation. It was a silence that was comfortable—save for the nearly crackling, sexual chemistry that flew between them. That, although quiet, wasn't hidden.

Every time a crew vacates a range station they are responsible for leaving it in pristine condition. Beds are fitted with fresh linens, clean towels are stacked in the bathrooms, and the kitchen is outfitted with non-perishable foodstuffs from the massive concrete cellar nearby.

When they unlocked the front door and entered the large space they were greeted by the scent of stale air, but otherwise the building was immaculate.

"I'll open a few windows," Delia said, dropping her duffel bag on the slate floor beside the staircase. "Air the place out."

"Sounds good. I'll grab the food supplies," he agreed, placing his bag beside hers and going out the door.

As the first surges of cool mountain air swept through the station, Delia ran through the routine open-for-use procedure. The radio equipment crackled when she flipped the switch, lifted the mike to her mouth, and said, "North ridge, checking in. over."

"Copy that, north ridge. Home base confirms. Over."

She booted up the expensive computer equipment on the center console. It continuously tracked wind speed, heat and weather conditions on one large monitor screen while another provided a grid pattern showing the quadrants surrounding the station and any current fire and smoke activity. The grids were empty.

Made from reinforced concrete, steel, and flame-retardant materials, the station was an above-grade bunker designed to withstand a fairly high degree of fire contact. It served as a replenishing station during fire combat and a training ground during the off-season. There was no better place to prepare

future smoke jumpers for fire duty than in the same type of environment they'd eventually be working in.

"This is all of it," Cooper said, setting a large carton on the stainless steel counter in the kitchen area. He began to unpack the food, placing everything either in the walk-in freezer or one of the huge refrigerators. When he'd finished he held up two wrapped bundles and smiled. "Dinner. I don't think it's gourmet fare but I don't care. I'm hungry enough to eat just about anything."

Delia grabbed two bottles of mineral water from the fridge and followed him to the far end of the large trestle table near the window. She'd pulled back the fire shutters while he'd been getting the gear in. The wide wall of glass was filled with twinkling stars on a black canvas.

With one eye on the window, Cooper unwrapped his sandwich and began to eat. He took a few bites before he nodded toward the glass. "It's an incredible view, even when it's dark out, isn't it? The stars, and that big moon, make up for the dark's concealment of what we know is out there."

She swallowed before she spoke. "You're right. Look at that moon ... it's on its way to being full and already it's huge. Up here I feel like I can reach out and touch it, caress its face or—"

"Give the man in the moon a poke in the eye," said Cooper, chuckling. He balled up his sandwich wrap and reached for his bottle of water. "When I was a little boy I asked my mother once whether or not I could poke the man in the moon in his eyes. He seemed so close, so real, and just enormous to me that I figured it must be possible. Truthfully,

I wanted to know how to do it so I could tell my friends I'd been brave enough to give the big yellow guy a fast poke. I've got to admit, I was pretty disappointed when she gave me the facts."

As she took the last bite, she smiled.

I'll bet you were an adorable little boy. And I'll bet you'll father gorgeous children, too. Genes. You've apparently got great genes. Otherwise, where would eyes like that—and a body to die for—come from?

"I was that way about Santa Claus," she admitted.
"Sometimes it's easier not to know the truth about certain things. Well, should we hit the sack now?"

The minute the words left her mouth she realized what she'd said. Her cheeks flushed instantly. In her rush to cover up her embarrassment she lifted her water bottle to her lips, tilted her head back and took a swallow. Then she choked.

Cooper came around the table and pat her back as she sputtered and gasped. Tears streamed from her eyes and her nose ran.

"Hey, take it easy." Cooper started rubbing her back with smooth, strong strokes. He placed one hand on her abdomen and gripped her firmly. "Breathe slow and even. I know it's hard, but you'll be fine."

Having Cooper hold her soothed Delia, and she began to breathe more easily. Using her paper napkin, she wiped her nose and eyes and gave a shaky laugh.

"I didn't plan on choking like that. Thanks for the help."

He continued to rub her back but he pulled his other hand from below her breasts. "It's usually the things we don't plan

to do that surprise us the most, isn't it? Although I've got to say I've never before had a woman react so violently to the idea of going to bed. Got yourself a little bed phobia, Delia?" His words were low and soft and sent tingles up her spine.

As her nipples got hard she straightened her back, turned to face him, and opened her mouth to speak. No words came out because when she faced Cooper she realized for the first time just how close he was. Very close. So close that she could smell the musky scent of him. So close that she could have leaned forward and kissed him—had she been foolish enough to do so.

Cooper must have made the same discoveries because he, too, straightened his spine. Taking his hand from her back, he said, "I think you're right. We've had a long day and it's probably time to turn in. Why don't you go up and I'll call in to base?"

Managing a steady gait, she tossed the garbage in the industrial-size can and headed for the stairs. When she reached them she turned and found him watching her. With a smile she said, "Good night, Cooper."

"Good night, Delia."

Upstairs Delia used the large bathroom before closing herself into one of the double bedrooms. Initially built for male-only usage, the sleeping accommodations had been modified after the first woman smoke jumper began to work the forests.

She climbed into bed and listened to his movements downstairs, wondering what he was doing and when he'd come up. Delia fell asleep without hearing him go to bed.

Chapter Two

The first week at the north ridge station passed quickly. During the day the pair filled their hours doing the typical duties required by fire jumpers. They piled brush, mainly, in preparation for a controlled burn of the large piles.

It was during one of the piling afternoons they had their first brush with each other. It was, like so many things in life, unplanned.

Delia flicked the toggle on the chainsaw, stopping the noisy instrument mid-roar. She'd dropped a limb from an old pine when she'd noticed it had been half-sheared—probably the result of a recent lightening storm. When she cut it, it had fallen with a thud to the spongy ground beneath the tree.

Block it? Or drag it as it is? It's pine, so it should be fairly light. And it was half-down so maybe it's drying out. Hell, if I block it I've got three or four pieces to carry over to the pile. If I drag it I've only got to do it once.

No question. I'll drag the damn thing.

Delia fit her fingers more snugly into her leather gloves and wrapped her hands around the cut end of the limb. Putting her weight behind it, she began to tug. It moved slowly across the forest floor but with every step she got closer to the brush pile. As she pulled the branch the top two buttons on her cotton work shirt opened, revealing her lacy pink bra.

Damn. I can't stop now. If I do I'll lose my momentum and if I do that I don't think I'll be able to get this damn thing

moving again. No, I'll fix my shirt when I get to the brush—oof!

The air left her lungs in a burst that was as fast as the way her feet left the ground. Delia loosened her grip on the limb as she fell, hoping as she did, that she wouldn't be crushed by it when it hit the ground.

Damn! I always thought I'd die jumping into a fire. Instead I'm going to be squashed by a tree limb.

Her fall was hard, even though it was cushioned by something—or someone—else.

"Son of a bitch!"

"What the hell—"

His arms held her as they tumbled, and when they stopped moving he still held her. She was pinned firmly to his body, hers on top of his and their faces only inches apart.

"Are you all right?" His hands ran over her, running down her spine, over her ass and down, then up her arms. When he was satisfied nothing was broken he put his arms back around her shoulders and scowled. "I thought for sure you'd have broken something. Does anything hurt?"

Sucking in a deep breath, she shook her head. Her hair had come undone and fell in a thick sheet across her shoulders, dropping down onto his chest. During a fire the hair had to be tightly contained as it was a high risk but during other times it was up to the discretion of the jumper how she wore it. For work, Delia pulled it back and the men she worked with rarely saw it unbound.

She noticed Cooper's eyes on her hair. Reaching up, she tossed it over her shoulder. "No. Nothing hurts. What about you? Did you break anything?"

He grinned. "Only your conversation, it seems. What the hell were you doing dragging half a tree, Delia? That thing must weigh more than you do."

Weight among fire jumpers was not a topic that was offlimits, as it was in so many other areas of life. Fire jumpers have minimum and maximum weight limits and those who worked the ranges were monitored closely to be sure they maintained the limits.

"Hey—you know I'm at the limit."

"Just barely," he teased. Tightening his arms and shifting his body, as if weighing her, he said, "It feels like you're hardly at the limit, actually. Are you sure you haven't lost a few pounds lately? You don't feel heavy enough to qualify."

She poked him in the shoulder, her finger meeting a hard wall of muscle. "Don't give me that—you know I'm over the limit. Believe me, I qualify. And stop weighing me like that, Coop. It's not professional for one jumper to weigh another with his body."

Coop. It was the first time she'd used the nickname out loud. She'd always maintained a formality with him, and the other guys, and that included not using nicknames. She was one of the only jumpers who used everyone's full name. If he noticed her slip he didn't show it.

"It's not as if I'm weighing Beck or one of the other, hairier guys," he said, holding her close and smiling. "This is actually

pretty enjoyable, Delia. You should let me weigh you more often."

You're right. This feels better than enjoyable, Coop. It feels—dangerous. What the hell am I doing lying on top of you like this? And damn, why do you feel so good? You're so hard and muscular, every slope of your body is pressing into mine and you're making me feel ... you're making me feel very unprofessional.

I'm wet. I want you. Oh, God, how I want you.

And—is that?

Cooper's eyes dropped to the creamy slopes of her breasts. She followed his gaze with her own and colored when she saw how exposed she'd become. The round outline of her nipples peeked out above the lacy edges of her bra, their firm points barely contained but very discernible beneath the flimsy lace.

He shifted slightly and any doubts she had about his arousal were lifted. Cooper's erection pressed steadily against the fabric between them, large and hard and throbbing. Delia's fingers itched to touch it, her pussy clenched with desire and her mouth dried as she lifted her eyes to his face. He was watching her carefully and when their eyes met his gaze held steady.

"I was only trying to help you," he said quietly. "I saw you dragging that big limb and thought I'd help you pull it. I didn't trip you on purpose, Delia."

"I know. Thanks for trying. I should have blocked it but..."
He swallowed and she watched his throat constrict. It was,
like so much else on the man, thick and firm and masculine.

And it was, she realized, another part of him that she longed to touch.

While her hands had resisted the urge to stroke his erection they didn't do the same with his neck. Without thinking, she trailed one finger along his jaw, over the razor stubble and down the slant of his skin to his throat. He was soft yet firm, an oxymoron that aroused her desire even further. As she touched him, her pussy ached. Her hips, as if having a mind of their own, pressed against his. A groan escaped him, a low, wild sound that stopped her finger immediately.

At first she thought he was going to kiss her when he lifted his head and opened his mouth. Her heart thudded and she held her breath but he only spoke, his voice hoarse.

"Delia, as much as I'm enjoying this I think we'd better get up. If we don't I'm liable to do something very unprofessional and I ... I don't want to do that. These are still work hours and I—God, I can't believe I'm saying this. I think we'd better get back to work."

Cooper lifted her gently to her feet as he stood up. When he did, she saw the prominent bulge in his jeans. It was as she'd imagined it to be and she drew her breath in sharply, lifting her eyes to meet his. He was looking at her with a serious expression on his face.

With one final look at her breasts he turned and walked through the forest, leaving her to tangle with the pine branch on her own.

No mention was made of their incident in the forest.

They were careful not to come in contact again. The days passed as they had before they'd touched. Their hours were filled with mundane tasks during the day and during the evenings they played backgammon or gin rummy until it grew dark. Bedtime for jumpers comes early as there is no way to tell when a night's sleep would have to sustain a body for days, especially during the fire season.

Two nights before they were to return to base they sat on the wrap-around porch in the deepening twilight. Iced tea was the beverage of choice since alcohol was prohibited at stations. Sitting in matching Adirondack-style chairs, they watched the sunset, heard the first cries of a horned owl, and saw a bald eagle ride the air currents. A feeling of contentment enveloped them. Neither was in a hurry for the evening to end.

"St. Louis, huh? Did you enjoy growing up there?" Cooper asked, taking a pull from his bottle of tea. "And tell me, what was in St. Louis that was an inspiration for you to become a fire jumper? It's not exactly like they've got an overabundance of forests there, is it?"

"Hardly," she said, smiling. Staring out at the streaks across the horizon, she considered his questions. "I always wanted to help people, to do something like that where I could serve the public. And I loved birds, was intrigued with flying. It was a natural progression, I think. Once I learned that fire jumping was an option available to me, I just set my eyes on it and did what I had to do to get where I am today. I love this job—I can't imagine doing anything else."

"I know how that is," Cooper said quietly. "It was a similar thing with me, the wanting to serve and protect. Only in my family it was almost a way of life. My uncle, my father, my brother—all jumpers. My other brother is a pilot, does small hops from Bozeman to the outlying areas. I learned young, jumping out of my brother's plane with my family coaching me. Like you, I can't picture myself doing anything but this."

"In the blood, isn't it?"

"Yeah," he said, smiling. Cooper stood and stretched, his strong physique silhouetted against the sky. "It's getting late. I'm going to read a while before I turn in. What about you?"

Delia stood, placed her hands on her hips and arched her back. As she stretched she said, "I think I'll write to my sister—a real paper-and-envelope letter to mail when we get back to base camp. She's married to a real stinker and I try to keep in pretty close contact with her."

"That's too bad." Cooper took a step closer as he spoke. "Have they been married long?"

"One day is too long with a guy like Daryl. But at least she's got a beautiful child from the marriage, so it hasn't been a total waste."

She grinned and raised her face to his as she spoke. When Delia's eyes lifted she saw that Cooper's attention was on the open neck of her shirt. Looking down, she saw that when she'd stretched her buttons had popped. As before, her breasts were exposed.

Her fingers flew to close the buttons, but his hands were just as fast. Cooper tangled his fingers with hers, stilling her. Then he traced the swell of her breasts with his fingertips,

trailing low until he touched the lace on her bra. When she didn't protest he moved his fingers lower and touched her taut nipples.

Tremors shot through her body and she closed her eyes and dropped her head back surrendering to the effect his touch was having on her.

His mouth found hers and his lips, firm yet tender, pressed against hers. Delia opened herself to him, pulling his tongue into her mouth and touching him in ways she'd only dreamed of doing.

You feel so good, Coop. So damn good ... I think I may be melting, like an ice cube in the sun ... oh, yes. Melt me, Coop. Please.

Delia pulled him close, crushing her body to his as she felt the sensations she'd held in check begin to grip her. Her sex slicked as she ground her hips on his. When she couldn't stand not feeling his skin on hers any longer she began to pull at his shirt buttons.

His fingers worked the few remaining buttons covering her open before he twisted the clasp on her bra. When her breasts were free he palmed them, massaging the smooth skin with gentle strokes.

This is good, but it's not enough. Not nearly enough. I need him—where it counts. I want to feel him inside me.

I need to feel him inside me.

Without waiting for common sense to kick in, she put her fingers on his waistband and opened his jeans. Pushing aside the fabric, she tugged his hard cock into the space between them and gave it a fast stroke. He was well-endowed, thick

and heavy. His erection throbbed hotly in her hand and Delia felt her own sex tremble in response. She pressed her thighs together as a burst of pleasure shot through her pussy, holding her breath and waiting for it to pass. When it did, she reached for his hand and guided it to her fly.

His voice was ragged against her ear as he unbuttoned her jeans. "Are you sure, Delia? Good God, are you sure?"

Shaking her head, she squeezed his penis and bit his shoulder. Yes, she was sure. She was sure that if she didn't feel him inside her soon she would lose her mind.

Cooper's fingers slipped into her panties and stroked the smooth cleft. He moaned, pulling his hand from her pants and pushing her jeans down to her ankles. Helping her out of them before he skinned out of his own, he waited until they were both naked before he fell to his knees before her. With another low sound, he urged her thighs apart and pressed his mouth to her sex.

His tongue touched her labia, stroking the plump lips slowly. Delia leaned against the wide railing, rested her elbows on the ledge and let her eyes close as her body began to respond to his touch. Cooper pressed his tongue to her swollen clitoris, swirling against it before pulling it between his lips.

The first waves of her climax swept through her as he sucked her—hard. Delia's legs shook as her pussy contracted and she wondered if she was going to lose her balance even as she ground herself against his mouth.

It was his grip on her hips that held her up, his pull on her pussy that swept her under and the desire of her heart that

made her beg for more than he'd given. She wanted him—all of him. Nothing less would—nothing less could—do.

As the final spasms of her orgasm faded she dropped to her knees beside him and pressed his body back against the platform. Straddling his hips, Delia slid her wet pussy over his hardness before lifting herself up and positioning his cock at her opening.

His voice stopped her, but only for a heartbeat.

"Are you sure, Delia? You don't have to do this if you—oh..." His words ended in a groan as she impaled herself on his staff and began to pump against him. They found a rhythm almost instantly and Cooper gripped her hips as they moved together. What had been a slow joining quickly turned frenzied.

Yes. Oh. God. Yes. I'm sure. Yes, I'm oh—yes!

Delia's body rose to the challenge and she began to climax again, her spasms gripping his penis so forcefully she feared she might hurt him. Her worries were forgotten as he held her more tightly, arched his back and buried himself deeply. The bursts from his cock were strong as his hot flood filled her, pulling her to a place beyond worry, care, or rational thought.

Chapter Three

The next morning neither of them spoke of what had happened on the deck. Instead, they made an obvious effort to act as they had before they'd had sex. They were professional and courteous and by the time they packed the SUV and headed back to base camp they were both nearly exhausted by the strain of acting as if nothing had happened.

It would have been so much easier for both of them if they'd discussed what had passed between them—but they didn't. The ride back to camp seemed long, the camaraderie they'd shared on the drive up lost, or at least misplaced, behind them. Cooper took the turns a little faster than he should have, a bit more recklessly than was his norm, yet Delia said nothing. Commenting on what he did or how he did it would only open a door that she wasn't at all sure she wanted unlocked, let alone opened.

What the hell have we done? A one-night stand on the observation deck? I've just acted like every female jumper hopes none of the others will act. God, how could I have done it? Had sex with him while we were supposed to be on duty? Sure, our day was done and we were relaxing but still—I shouldn't have done it.

Damn. I wonder if Cooper is going to tell the other guys what went on. I don't think he will but who knows? And if they all find out I'll deserve every disgusting look I get, every damn proposition, because I've allowed myself to lose sight of what I'm here to do.

She chanced a sideways glance at him. Cooper's chiseled features, set in a serious expression as he watched the road, made her heart lurch and her pussy tingle. A fine sheen of perspiration covered her forehead as she looked down at her hands, twisted together on her lap.

Who am I trying to kid? I let myself fall in love with him. Now there's no going back to what we had before.

When they arrived at base camp it was instantly obvious that something was wrong. Men ran from place to place, most dressed in full turn-out gear and carrying their jump packs. Cooper parked the vehicle on the shoulder, out of the way of the loading trucks, in a spray of gravel. Delia jumped onto the drive before they'd stopped moving and Cooper was hot on her heels.

They stopped the first man they saw, a veteran jumper named Chris. He held his hard hat in one hand while he held his pack on his shoulder with the other.

"Chris, where's the fire?" Cooper asked. It was obvious there was a fire so asking *where* rather than *if* not only made sense it saved time. And time, they knew, was both the enemy and the ally.

A smoke jumper's primary concern was getting to the fire site early enough to keep the fire from getting out of control. Every second counted.

"Two thirty miles west. First Sherpa's going out in twenty. You want to be on it, you'd better hurry," Chris said, not breaking stride. He nodded as he tossed his equipment into the back of a rapidly filling truck.

"I'll be on it," Cooper said, breaking into a jog and heading for the station.

"Me, too."

* * * *

The first time anyone jumps into a raging inferno is a frightening experience. And every time after that? It's just as frightening. Humans, as well as those in the animal kingdom, are conditioned to *run from fire*, *not run into it*. But that's exactly what smoke jumpers do—they travel to the flames and jump into the fray. Often they have little or no communication with the outside world for days, surrounded by smoke and flames in conditions that are reminiscent of those used to describe Hell.

But they do it—over and over again. They do it because they have an unquenchable desire to save and protect people, property, and the vast resources of our country.

Some, like Beck, do it because it's the only way of life they've ever known. Others, like Cooper, jump because they've been jumping since they could walk. There are those, like Chris and a few of the other guys on the team, who do it for the thrill of jumping, the pride of a job well done and the inner satisfaction they get from knowing they've kept our forests intact for the next generation to enjoy.

"Listen up, the teams are as follows: Chris and Jack, Brent and Dylan, Joe and Jeff, Coop and Delia, Connor and Mark, Nick and..."

Days in the forest with him. We'll be working so closely that we won't have a chance to ignore each other. Damn—

just when we need some time apart. It can't be helped but I know it'll be fine. We're both professionals—we'll just do our job.

The jump was standard. The teams were separated by a few miles, stretched out along a line on the ridge above the fire. Their main objective was to clear a channel, create a firebreak so that the fire wouldn't be able to spread. It was hard, dirty work but in many cases it was enough to contain a fire.

When they hit the ground, they rolled their chutes and stowed them in their packs. With over a hundred pounds of gear strapped to her back and a hard hat on her head Delia looked like any of the other jumpers from a distance. She worked as hard as they did, too.

As darkness fell they began to feel the first twinges of tiredness sweep over them. They'd been chopping and digging a wide path for nearly seven hours without a break. When they reached a small stand of poplars they paused to give themselves a much deserved breather.

"They're all going to have to come down," Delia said, resting against one of the trees. With paper-like bark and quick-burning trunks and limbs, poplars were fast fuel for a forest fire.

"Yeah, but we can rest for a few minutes before we start dropping them. We're further up the ridge than I thought we'd be—further up than Beck figured we'd be, too." He removed his hard hat and wiped his sleeve across his brow. They were both hot and sweaty but he managed to look sexy even with a fine layer of grime on him.

"I know. Beck thought we'd still be down there." Delia pointed to a spot they'd already cleared. "Eight hours into it. It's only seven and we're already further along. We move fast, I guess."

Shit. When am I going to learn to think before I speak? We move fast—crap.

Cooper stared at her for a long minute, his features undecipherable. When he spoke he sounded resigned, as if faced with a fact that didn't entirely please him. "You're right, there's no arguing with that. We do move fast. Or at least we did."

Reaching into his pack, he pulled out the radio and pressed a button. Instantly the sound of another voice filled the air. "Base. Over."

"Base. Team Four, C and D. we're high on the ridge, about two miles further than planned. Planning a short break before dropping a stand of pops. Do you copy?"

"Affirmative, Team Four. We copy. Hold your position until further notice. We have a shift. Will inform ASAP. Sit tight for now."

"Copy. Out."

He stowed the radio and raised an eyebrow at her. "A shift. Wonder if it's flame or air. Could be a while, we should drop our packs and get some rest while we wait."

Unhooking their gear and placing it in the shade of the trees, they sat on the cool ground in silence. The forest around them was cool, calm and quiet. It was hard to believe that a raging fire burned just a few miles from where they sat. Although they'd been told to wait for further instructions

neither of them let their guard down, knowing a shift could mean any number of things and that the flames could be upon them in a matter of minutes.

Jumpers learned, though, to take any moments of rest and use them well since those moments could be extremely rare. Cooper stretched his legs out in front of him and Delia did the same. They sat with their backs against a tree, so close that their hips touched.

"Delia, I know this is a shitty time to talk about this but I have no idea when we'll get another quiet minute, at least not in the next few days," he began. Pausing to take a long swallow from the water bottle he held, he scanned the tree line before turning his eyes to hers. "About what happened last night—"

Shit. I hope you're not going to apologize for fucking me. God, I don't think I can stand it if you do.

"You know, Coop, I'm not sure we should talk about that right now," she said, leaning toward him and slapping his thigh conspiratorially. She forced an easy tone into her voice and said, "Hell, maybe we shouldn't ever discuss it. It's just one of those things, maybe—one of those things that happens between people."

A muscle worked in his jaw, one that she'd seen many times before. There was no easy tone in his voice, no carefree banter when he said, "Do you think so? Is that what it was, just one of those things?"

She realized he was angry at the same moment he pulled her to him and kissed her. His touch was rough, all gentleness gone as he forced her lips apart and thrust his

tongue inside her mouth. Shock gave way to excitement and she pulled him closer, her body trembled with desire at his touch.

I don't care that we're in a fire. I don't give a shit—I want him. I want him now.

It may be the only time we have for this. Fuck, base said to relax, didn't they? I'm going to relax—with his cock in me if I can.

Delia reached for his crotch and pressed her hand against him. He was, as she'd suspected, fully erect. Her fingers found his fly and pulled the zipper down. Plunging into his heavy work pants she wrapped her fingers around his thickness and maneuvered him out. A bead seeped from his slit and she massaged it into his skin as she bit his lower lip and moaned.

"Fuck me, Coop. Please—fuck me."

Rising up onto her knees, she undid her pants and pushed them down to her knees, taking her panties down with them. She knelt beside him, putting her hand on his cock and stroking him while he pressed open her legs as far as they could go and touched her slick folds. He found her swollen clit and pressed his thumb against it while her hips bucked, urging him to move harder and faster.

"Fuck me—now," she moaned, lying back against the cushion of fallen leaves and pushing her pants down further.

Delia's thighs could only part a few inches but Cooper poised himself above her and pressed his cock into position. One hard shove was all it took for him to slide into her wetness. One more thrust pushed Delia over the edge and

into a thigh-clenching climax. Her moans filled the air as Cooper's flesh touched hers with short, fast slaps. A few more plunges sent him toward his own orgasm. His cock jumped as he flooded her.

As their breathing slowed the radio crackled. Cooper reached for it without withdrawing from her.

"Base to Team Four."

"Team Four. Copy."

"Fire line has shifted. Repeat fire line has shifted. Proceed southwest until line is sighted. Join teams already on site. Repeat. Shift in fire line. Proceed southwest until line is sighted. Join teams on site. Team Four, do you copy?"

"Copy. We're on our way."

Tucking the radio into place, Cooper pulled out and stood. He pushed his penis back into his pants, zipped, and offered her a hand all in one fluid motion. Delia got to her feet and pulled her pants up without his help, shouldering her pack and starting down the hill toward the fire without looking back. She knew he followed her but as she adjusted her hard hat, pulled on fire resistant gloves, and took her axe from the pack loop, she couldn't look him in the eye.

Delia didn't know what was going to happen over the course of the next few days, but at that moment she couldn't bear to look at the man she'd just had sex with.

* * * *

The fire took a week to contain. During that time Delia didn't see much of Cooper. When they met up with the other teams they combined to make one long team, a string of

axes, hatchets, and shovels that chopped and dug and fought every ember and flame without wasting a precious thought on anything not connected with the job before them.

Delia's ride back to base in one of the fixed-wing DC-3s sent to retrieve the jumpers was, as they all were, a quiet ride. Gone was the anticipation of the jump, the firefight or the preservation of wild lands. In its place was fatigue, hunger, soot, smoke and the overwhelming scent of heat.

The first thing a jumper did when returning to base was ready the fire gear for its next jump. There was no predicting when the next jump would come, so the packs were always prepared. Then came showers, food and rest, and not necessarily in that order. Nothing else seemed as important as those things—not to anyone, including Delia and Cooper.

It was two days before the couple spoke. Two long days. Forty-eight hours in which Delia grew more and more annoyed with Cooper's lack of communication. Hell, he'd had time to shower, get his tools in order, rest and eat. She thought the least he could do was to touch base with her, even if it was just a quick wave. But nothing? Nothing pissed her off.

Delia didn't hear his heavy work boots approaching, she was so intent on sharpening the blade on her chainsaw. When he stopped beside her at the repair bench in the open-air shed, she startled, poking herself in the hand with the newly sharpened length of chain.

"Shit!"

Cooper pulled her hand close to his chest, placing his handkerchief over the small wound and applying pressure. He

raised her hand, the back side of it against his chest and held it high.

"Are you trying to poke holes in yourself?" he asked, scowling. "You could have cut your damn fingers off."

She tugged on her hand but he held it fast. The pain in her palm was forgotten as their eyes locked. "What business is it of yours if I cut my whole damn hand off, Cooper? Honestly, I don't know how it impacts you."

His eyebrows lowered and he glared at her.

"Really. Let my hand go, will you? You're hurting me." She tugged again. This time he released her and her hand smacked against her chest. She nearly stumbled but Cooper reached out and steadied her, his fingers biting into her upper arm.

"You don't know how it impacts me? Oh, is your wounded hand one of the many subjects that is off limits with you? Things that aren't open to discussion, by your own decision? Is that what this is—just another example of what you will and will not do or discuss or feel or—"

"Feel? How the hell do you know how I feel?"

He took a step closer and lowered his voice. "Oh, have you forgotten, Delia? I know exactly how you feel. And how you taste. And how you moan when you climax. Really, I would have thought you'd remember that." His tone was teasing and seductive and although it thrilled her it also increased her annoyance.

"Disgusting—you're absolutely disgusting, do you know that?"

He came closer still. When he spoke she got a whiff of his cologne. "I don't think you really believe that—not at all. In fact, dear Delia, I think your refusal to discuss what's been going on between us is fear, pure and simple." He reached for her hand and she was so shocked that she allowed him to take it. A quick examination satisfied him and he spoke as he re-wrapped it in the cotton square. "You are an incredible woman—fearless in the face of fire. I've seen you jump out of a plane like most women dash to a shoe sale at a department store. You have no fear when it comes to smoke, falling trees, or flying embers. But me? And the way you feel about me? And the way I feel about you—hell, that's what scares you. I think that scares you more than any fire ever could."

How can you know me this well, Coop? How can you see inside my mind and heart like this?

"Is that what you think?" She asked quietly. Cooper still cradled her hand and her fingers closed automatically over his as she whispered, "How do you feel about me?"

Cooper looked deeply into her eyes. "I tried to tell you during the break in the fire. I knew it wasn't the greatest time to talk but I didn't know when we'd get another chance. And I would have told you, too, but ... well, let's just say you distracted me, Delia, and leave it at that. And then, right afterward—"

"We fought the fire."

"That's right."

If I have to wait one more second I'll lose my mind.

"And now?"

Leaning so close their foreheads nearly touched, Cooper said, "and now ... now I love you, Delia. I have for a long time—long before we were together on the observation deck. Honestly, I've wanted you for over a year. I think I fell in love with you during the forest fire, out near—"

"Red Butte."

He grinned. "That's right. I've felt this way for so long that I don't think I know how to feel any differently."

Delia felt her heart race as she searched her mind for words. When she didn't speak he went on.

"Delia, I don't know how you feel but what happened between us wasn't just sex—at least not for me. I don't know what I can say to you to make you believe how I feel but whatever it takes, I'm going to try. Because I love you, very much. And I can't see my life without you in it, without you by my—"

The words came without any thought. "Then don't. I love you, Cooper. I always have. I ... I love you," she said softly. Once the words left her mouth for the first time there was no way to hold them back. As she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and raised her lips to his she whispered, "I love you."

Claiming her mouth with his he kissed her, a fast kiss that whet her desire without satisfying it at all. Delia shot him a puzzled look as he pulled his lips from hers with a grin and took her by the hand. Leading her to the first aid building, he said, "I think we should get a few stitches in this hand. Then I've got a few other ideas about how we should spend the

rest of the day—ideas that don't include chainsaws, fires, or clothing."

Delia laughed and ran toward the door with the big red cross painted above it.

Those sound like my favorite kind of ideas, Coop. And when we've gone through your ideas, I've got a few of my own we can try out.

About the Author

Kate Burns loves few things as much as she loves writing. She always knew she wanted to be a writer but circumstances kept her from pursuing her first love until a few years ago. That's when she tossed in the towel on her "conventional" job and moved back to Martha's Vineyard and began to write full time. Since then she's sold a modest number of books using her real name.

Writing erotic romance is a new venture for Kate—one that she's having a lot of fun exploring. It promises to keep her occupied for a long time to come. When she's not busy writing Kate enjoys painting and cooking. She spends a lot of time boating with her boyfriend, a tall, handsome man who is the inspiration for all of her leading men. Kate Burns is a happy woman—and it shows in her writing.

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