

By Radclyffe

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CHAPTER ONE

Mallory rolled out of the rack at 0445—a good half hour before anyone else was likely to be up. She wanted to beat the guys who slept in the barracks across the yard to the showers before hot water became a premium. Then a nice quiet, solitary breakfast. Fifteen minutes of privacy was worth a lot when she'd be spending the next four weeks with them twenty-four/seven. Assuming all four rookies made the cut. Odds were they would—she'd handpicked them over the winter, combing through the applications for just the right fit. When you lived with a person for six months and put your life in their hands every day, fit mattered. They were all experienced wildland firefighters, each had a critical secondary skill, and she'd gotten good personal references. Still, things could change in the off-season. One broke his leg skiing over the winter, and she'd been lucky to get a qualified last-minute replacement. Another had suddenly transferred to a station closer to his home just the week before, so she was still a man down to start.

She always hoped the new guys would make the grade. Usually, rookies flunked out of basic training because of poor conditioning. They all thought they were in great shape coming in—but one or two always discovered differently after a few days of lugging an eighty-five-pound pack over dense mountain terrain. She'd find out soon enough. Boot camp started at 0600.

The loft was chilly verging on frigid, and she quickly pulled on jeans and shrugged into a heavy sweatshirt with a United States Forest Service emblem on the chest over the thermals she'd worn to bed. Unlike the seasonal guys, she was a year-round forest ranger, wildland

firefighter, and smokejumper. Most of the year, this station was her home. Impatiently she freed the thick waves caught in the hood at the base of her neck. Damn it, she needed a haircut, and when was she supposed to find time to do that? Not that her appearance was going to matter to anyone, but she hated when her hair got in her way when she was working, and it was getting too long to pull back in the short ponytail she usually wore. Something else to put on her endless to-do list.

Grabbing her shower gear, she headed for the ladder at the far end of her sleeping loft over the hangar deck that housed the twin-engine C-23 Sherpa jump ship. The minute she climbed down, the colder air in the cavernous space practically frosted her lungs. Probably in the thirties outside. The Montana mountains were still snow-covered in early May. Her breath hung in clouds as she hustled across the gravel yard toward the standby shack, a low-slung, metal-sided building with haphazardly arranged extensions that housed the sleeping quarters, mess hall, equipment and locker rooms. No one stirred around the barracks. Guys were still sleeping. Oh joy.

“Mallory,” a gruff male voice called. “Hey, Ice! See you a minute?”

So much for the leisurely shower. Mallory hadn’t counted on Sully being up so early, but she should have. He was as much a workaholic as she was—although she preferred to think of her work ethic as thorough, rather than obsessed.

“Yo, Sully. On my way.” Abandoning her visions of hot steam and suds, Mallory reversed course back to the ops room next to the hangar and stopped in the doorway. Her immediate superior, Chuck Sullivan, was bent over the desk in his cramped one-window office, his arms braced on either side of a haphazard pile of papers and file folders. A huge bulletin board covered with aerial and terrain maps occupied the far wall. A rickety stand in one corner held a Pyrex coffeepot in a dingy white coffeemaker. The room smelled of burnt coffee. He’d been there a while.

Mallory suppressed a twinge of guilt. She knew what this was about—she’d been dragging her feet sorting through all the paperwork that went along with her new job as ops manager of the Yellowrock interagency smokejumping unit. It wasn’t like she hadn’t told Sully she was terrible at desk work when he asked her to take the position

suddenly vacated when Tom Reynolds couldn't jump anymore. A bad landing had ended Tom up in the hospital with a crushed lumbar disc. She had seniority after eight years spending May through November fighting wildfires with the USFS, and she had plenty of experience directing activities as incident commander in the field, but ask her to fill out a timesheet—she'd rather spend two weeks sleeping on the ground during the height of mosquito season. "Look, Sully, if this is about filling that last position, I read through the applications last night. I think there are a couple of good candidates—"

"Yeah, about that," Sully said, looking up. His smoke-gray eyes were hooded, the furrows extending out from the corners paler than the rest of his tanned skin, even though summer was still more than a month away. Something in his look made her stomach tighten.

"What?" Mallory said, leaning her shoulder against the doorjamb.

"The last position has been filled."

"That's interesting. How come I don't know about it? I thought the training manager chose the crew." Mallory clamped a lid on her temper. Something was off, but whatever it was, Sully wasn't likely to be responsible, so venting at him wasn't going to help. Sully had been supervisor at the Yellowrock station for fifteen years, and they got along well. Never had any problem communicating. Now he was uneasy and had made a decision that directly affected her for the next half a year without consulting her. She didn't like surprises. Anticipation was her holy grail—she planned, studied, considered contingencies. Orderly, well-thought-out plans brought the team home whole. Fire was unpredictable. Fickle and frivolous. She couldn't afford to be. Not when lives were at stake. "What's going on, Sully?"

"We've been assigned a transfer from Grangeville to fill that vacancy."

"A hotshot?" Mallory tried not to grind her teeth. Hotshots usually worked as part of wildland fire suppression teams on large, long-term fires. They were used to performing as units and often had difficulty making the transition from field-based firefighting to the rapid deployment into remote areas that was the daily fare of smokejumpers. "Geez, Sully. How come I'm just hearing about this?"

Sully straightened and jammed his hands in the pockets of his khaki work pants. His jaw worked like he was still chewing the tobacco he'd

given up the year before. Yeah, he was definitely unhappy. “Because I’m just hearing about it myself. I got a call from regional headquarters informing me of the posting. The whole thing was handled a couple levels above my pay grade.”

“I’ve never heard of the higher-ups getting involved in something as basic as hiring a crew member.”

“Well, she’s not just any crew member.”

“She?” Mallory raised an eyebrow.

Sully laughed. “What? You think you and Sarah are the only women capable of doing the job?”

“I know we’re not. Except I know all the other female jumpers, and most of the women on the field crews too. None of them said anything to me about wanting to come on board. What’s her name?”

“Jac Russo.”

Mallory frowned. “Why do I know that name?”

“Maybe because her father is Franklin Russo?”

Mallory stiffened. “Oh, you gotta be kidding me. The right-wing senator from Idaho? The right-to-life, anti-gay, anti-affirmative-everything guy?”

“That’s the one. The rumor mill says he’s going to give Powell a run for his money for the White House come election time next year.”

“Just gets better and better,” Mallory said.

Sully smiled a little grimly. “Never knew you were political.”

“I’m not. Usually.” Mallory shook her head. Sully knew she was a lesbian—so did everybody else she worked with. She didn’t make an issue of it, she didn’t hide it. She was who she was. In the air, in the wilderness digging a line or setting a burnout, no one cared who you slept with. All they cared about was how well you did your job and looked after your buddies. Most of the time she was too busy working to think about what bureaucrats were doing, but she couldn’t turn on the television or pick up a magazine or read the news without hearing something about Russo and his campaign to turn the country back to a time when straight white men held all the power. And his vitriol turned her stomach. “This posting is politics, right? Somebody owes somebody a favor and we get to pick up the tab?” She raked her hand through her hair. Her too-damn-long hair. “Does she even know anything about firefighting? This is crazy. I don’t want some pampered politician’s daughter, who probably thinks spending six months in

the mountains with a bunch of men will be fun and look good on her résumé, on my team. Hell, if she doesn't get herself killed, she'll get one of us killed."

"Slow down, Ice. She's not a rookie. Not quite. She worked part of a season with a Bureau of Land Management hotshot team in Idaho." He fished around on his desk and came up with a dog-eared file folder. He flipped it open, turned it around, and held it out to her. "Besides, real-life experience is an acceptable substitute for the usual field training, and she's got that covered."

"She's still a rookie as far as I'm concerned." Mallory regarded the folder as if it were a rattler coiled in the brush trailside, waiting to strike. There couldn't be anything good inside that file. Smokejumpers returned year after year to the same crew; vacancies were few, and the waiting list long. She hadn't seen Russo's name on any applications, but somehow, Russo had managed to leapfrog to the head of the list, and that could only mean someone had pulled strings. Anyone qualified for the job didn't need to do that. "Come on, Sully. You know this doesn't make any sense. If she's already on a crew, why move her over to ours? We'll have to train her to jump—"

"You'd have to train whoever joined us to jump, Ice."

"Still, I don't get it."

"Neither do I." Sully gave her a wry shrug and waggled the folder. "I wasn't given the option. She'll be here this morning. You might as well look at this."

Reluctantly Mallory took the folder and glanced at the typed application and the color photo clipped to the top of the page. Jac Russo. Twenty-seven—well, at least she had a couple of years on Russo in age and quite a few more in experience. At just thirty, she was young to captain a jump crew and wouldn't have wanted to start out the season breaking in a hotshot who discounted her authority because she was younger or less experienced. The photo was a good one. Even the Polaroid head shot couldn't dampen the appeal of bittersweet-chocolate eyes and thick black wavy hair—true black, not dark brown like her own—and also unlike hers, neatly trimmed above her collar. Russo's face was a little too strong to be pretty, with bold cheekbones and an angular jaw. A decent face, nothing out of the ordinary, really. Mallory got caught in the dark eyes that almost leapt out of the glossy surface of the photo—intense, unsmiling, penetrating eyes. Eyes that held secrets

and dared you to reveal yours. Okay, so maybe she was a little bit good-looking. The guys would probably be happy to have her around as long as she had even marginal skills. Mallory didn't agree. She couldn't afford to have anyone jumping who couldn't carry her own weight. No one was coming out of the mountains on a litter on her watch. Not this year. Not ever again.

"I'm telling you right now," Mallory said, flipping a page to look at the work experience Russo had listed, "if she can't cut it, I'm not putting her up in the air. I'm not going to let her endanger my team. I don't care whose daughter she is."

"I wouldn't expect you to," someone said in a husky alto from right behind her.

Mallory spun around and went nose to nose with a woman about her height, their bodies colliding hard enough for her to feel firm breasts and a muscled torso press against her front. Molding to her—except that had to be her imagination. She pulled back, and the black-haired stranger took her in with a slow up-and-down perusal and an expression that was half-arrogant, half-amused. Her lips were full and sensuous and unsmiling—like in the photo.

"Jump to conclusions much?" the woman said.

"Sorry," Mallory muttered. "I didn't realize you were behind me."

"I gathered that." The really nice lips smiled, but the eyes were cool. "I'm Jac Russo."

"Yes." Mallory indicated the folder. "I saw the picture."

"Did you also see the part that said I've got search and rescue experience? Can handle explosives? How about the part—"

"I noticed you're short on field experience," Mallory said tightly, "and this isn't remedial class. Basic training starts"—she checked her watch—"in forty-five minutes."

"I'll be ready," Russo said. "And I'm a fast learner."

"We'll see," Mallory murmured.

"What—you've already made up your mind?" Jac's expression tightened and her eyes went flat. "Let me guess. Something you heard on TV, maybe?"

"Sorry, I must have missed the bulletin," Mallory shot back. She lifted the folder. "I was talking about what *isn't* in here."

“Don’t be so sure you know all about me from what you read,” Russo said.

“I’ll reserve judgment till I’ve seen how you run. You’ll be first up this morning.”

“Good enough.”

Sully cleared his throat loudly. “Russo, I’ve got some paperwork for you to complete.”

“Yes sir, I’ll be right there.” Jac didn’t shift her gaze from Mallory’s. “I didn’t get your name.”

“Mallory James.” Mallory smiled thinly. “I’m the ops manager and training coordinator. You can call me Boss. Or Ice.”

“What do your friends call you?”

“Mallory.” She made sure Russo got the message she wasn’t planning to fraternize with her. Not that she ever really did with any of the crew. She hung out with them, swapped stories, but she never really shared anything personal with anyone. Breaking away from Russo’s probing gaze, Mallory turned and tossed the folder onto Sully’s desk. She wasn’t sure what besides anger might show in her eyes, and she didn’t want Russo to see past her temper to her worry, or her fear. “Roll call at oh six hundred. Don’t be late.”

“Can’t wait.”

Mallory snorted and strode away.

Jac watched until the ops manager disappeared into a building across the tarmac. *Well, that was a great start.*

She’d been hoping to slide in under the radar, but that obviously wasn’t going to happen now. She couldn’t tell from the conversation exactly what was behind Mallory James’s animosity. Most of the time, a cold reception had little to do with her and a lot to do with her father. The higher he’d risen in national politics, the more airtime he got and the more controversy he stirred up. He seemed to thrive on the reactions his often extreme positions evoked—even death threats didn’t bother him. Unfortunately, the more visible he became, the more his notoriety overflowed onto his family. Her mother was an anxious wreck who didn’t want to leave the house past the line of protesters lined up across the street and the reporters in the driveway. Her sister Carly was generally humiliated by her parents anyhow, the way all seventeen-year-olds were, and was trying even harder than Jac had to prove she

was nothing like their ultraconservative right-wing father. She'd started running with a tough crowd of dropouts and delinquents.

Jac had been hoping to escape some of the recent fallout here, but no such luck. She was used to being judged on the basis of her father's latest sound bite, and usually that didn't bother her. Today it did.

She squared her shoulders and faced the guy watching her speculatively from behind the desk. She'd been proving herself all her life—or more accurately, disproving the assumptions everyone made about her. In high school all she'd had to do was demonstrate her willingness to break the rules to crack the mold her family had created for her. Considering that breaking the rules usually involved sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll—all the things her father railed against—divorcing herself from her family's politics hadn't been all that hard. Most of the time rebelling had been fun, but she wasn't sixteen anymore, and while she still chafed under the weight of rules and regs, she'd pretty much given up all the rest. The drugs and rock 'n' roll for sure, and the sex most of the time. But then, it didn't take a whole lot of sex to get her into a whole lot of trouble.

Realizing the guy was still watching her, still waiting, she said, "I guess you weren't expecting me."

He grinned fleetingly. "You're quick."

Jac shook her head and muttered, "Damn it, Nora, thanks for warning me." She walked forward and held out her hand. "Jac Russo. I take it you got that part already."

"Chuck Sullivan. I'm kind of the overseer around here, but Ice calls the shots."

"Interesting nickname."

His gaze narrowed. "None better at the job."

Jac held up her hands. "Hey, I don't doubt it. She just seemed a little fiery there for a minute."

Again the fleeting grin and a shake of his head. "Not much riles her up."

"I'm not sure I'm happy about having that privilege, then." Jac sighed. "I didn't know about this myself until yesterday when someone on my father's staff told me, but I thought you'd been contacted. I don't blame you for being pissed."

"I'm not pissed," Sullivan said quietly.

Jac tilted her head toward the door behind her. "She is."

“Don’t worry about it. Pass basic training, you’ll be part of the team.”

Too bad it wasn’t that easy. Being good at what she did, being qualified, pulling her own weight—all those things helped her fit in, but they never helped her to be accepted. When she’d been younger, she’d desperately wanted to be accepted. Now she didn’t care. At least that’s what she told herself most days. The freeze in Mallory James’s eyes was nothing new, although usually the disdain was motivated by something other than her showing up where she wasn’t expected or wanted. All the same, for the first time in a long time, she’d wanted to melt the icy reception she’d gotten used to receiving.

She wanted this job, sure. She’d wanted it for a long time, but she hadn’t planned on getting it this way. But now she was here, and she wanted to stay. She wanted Mallory James to admit she was good enough to stay.