

Chapter 1

Mount Hood Aviation's lead smokejumper Johnny Akbar Jepps rolled out of his lower bunk careful not to bang his head on the upper. Well, he tried to roll out, but every muscle fought him, making it more a crawl than a roll. He checked the clock on his phone. Late morning.

He'd slept twenty of the last twenty-four hours and his body felt as if he'd spent the entire time in one position. The coarse plank flooring had been worn smooth by thousands of feet hitting exactly this same spot year in and year out for decades. He managed to stand upright... then he felt it, his shoulders and legs screamed.

Oh, right.

The New Tillamook Burn. Just about the nastiest damn blaze he'd fought in a decade of jumping wildfires. Two hundred thousand acres—over three hundred square miles—of rugged Pacific Coast Range forest, poof! The worst forest fire in a decade for the Pacific Northwest, but they'd killed it off without a single fatality or losing a single town. There'd been a few bigger ones,

out in the flatter eastern part of Oregon state. But that much area—mostly on terrain too steep to climb even when it wasn't on fire—had been a horror.

Akbar opened the blackout curtain and winced against the summer brightness of blue sky and towering trees that lined the firefighter's camp. Tim was gone from the upper bunk, without kicking Akbar on his way out. He must have been as hazed out as Akbar felt.

He did a couple of side stretches and could feel every single minute of the eight straight days on the wildfire to contain the bastard, then the excruciating nine days more to convince it that it was dead enough to hand off to a Type II incident mop-up crew. Not since his beginning days on a hotshot crew had he spent seventeen days on a single fire.

And in all that time nothing more than catnaps in the acrid safety of the "black"—the burned-over section of a fire, black with char and stark with no hint of green foliage. The mop-up crews would be out there for weeks before it was dead past restarting, but at least it was truly done in. That fire wasn't merely contained; they'd killed it bad.

Yesterday morning, after demobilizing, his team of smokies had pitched into their bunks. No wonder he was so damned sore. His stretches worked out the worst of the kinks but he still must be looking like an old man stumbling about.

He looked down at the sheets. Damn it. They'd been fresh before he went to the fire, now he'd have to wash them again. He'd been too exhausted to shower before sleeping and they were all smeared with the dirt and soot that he could still feel caking his skin. Two-Tall Tim, his number two man and as tall as two of Akbar, kinda, wasn't in his bunk. His towel was missing from the hook.

Shower. Shower would be good. He grabbed his own towel and headed down the dark, narrow hall to the far end of the bunk house. Every one of the dozen doors of his smoke teams were still closed, smokies still sacked out. A glance down another

corridor and he could see that at least a couple of the Mount Hood Aviation helicopter crews were up, but most still had closed doors with no hint of light from open curtains sliding under them. All of MHA had gone above and beyond on this one.

“Hey, Tim.” Sure enough, the tall Eurasian was in one of the shower stalls, propped up against the back wall letting the hot water stream over him.

“Akbar the Great lives,” Two-Tall sounded half asleep.

“Mostly. Doghouse?” Akbar stripped down and hit the next stall. The old plywood dividers were flimsy with age and gray with too many showers. The Mount Hood Aviation firefighters’ Hoodie One base camp had been a kids’ summer camp for decades. Long since defunct, MHA had taken it over and converted the playfields into landing areas for their helicopters, and regraded the main road into a decent airstrip for the spotter and jump planes.

“Doghouse? Hell, yeah. I’m like ten thousand calories short.” Two-Tall found some energy in his voice at the idea of a trip into town.

The Doghouse Inn was in the nearest town. Hood River lay about a half hour down the mountain and had exactly what they needed: smokejumper-sized portions and a very high ratio of awesomely fit young women come to windsurf the Columbia Gorge. The Gorge, which formed the Washington and Oregon border, provided a fantastically target-rich environment for a smokejumper too long in the woods.

“You’re too tall to be short of anything,” Akbar knew he was being a little slow to reply, but he’d only been awake for minutes.

“You’re like a hundred thousand calories short of being even a halfway decent size,” Tim was obviously recovering faster than he was.

“Just because my parents loved me instead of tying me to a rack every night ain’t my problem, buddy.”

He scrubbed and soaped and scrubbed some more until he felt mostly clean.

“I’m telling you, Two-Tall. Whoever invented the hot shower, that’s the dude we should give the Nobel prize to.”

“You say that every time.”

“You arguing?”

He heard Tim give a satisfied groan as some muscle finally let go under the steamy hot water. “Not for a second.”

Akbar stepped out and walked over to the line of sinks, smearing a hand back and forth to wipe the condensation from the sheet of stainless steel screwed to the wall. His hazy reflection still sported several smears of char.

“You so purdy, Akbar.”

“Purdier than you, Two-Tall.” He headed back into the shower to get the last of it.

“So not. You’re jealous.”

Akbar wasn’t the least bit jealous. Yes, despite his lean height, Tim was handsome enough to sweep up any ladies he wanted.

But on his own, Akbar did pretty damn well himself. What he didn’t have in height, he made up for with a proper smokejumper’s muscled build. Mixed with his tan-dark Indian complexion, he did fine.

The real fun, of course, was when the two of them went cruising together. The women never knew what to make of the two of them side by side. The contrast kept them off balance enough to open even more doors.

He smiled as he towed down. It also didn’t hurt that their opening answer to “what do you do” was “I jump out of planes to fight forest fires.”

Worked every damn time. God he loved this job.

#

The small town of Hood River, a winding half-an-hour down the mountain from the MHA base camp, was hopping. Mid-June, colleges letting out. Students and the younger set of professors high-tailing it to the Gorge. They packed the bars

and breweries and sidewalk cafes. Suddenly every other car on the street had a windsurfing board tied on the roof.

The snooty rich folks were up at the historic Timberline Lodge on Mount Hood itself, not far in the other direction from MHA. Down here it was a younger, thrill seeker set and you could feel the energy.

There were other restaurants in town that might have better pickings, but the Doghouse Inn was MHA tradition and it was a good luck charm—no smokie in his right mind messed with that. This was the bar where all of the MHA crew hung out. It didn't look like much from the outside, just a worn old brick building beaten by the Gorge's violent weather. Aged before its time, which had been long ago.

But inside was awesome.

A long wooden bar stretched down one side with a half-jillion microbrew taps and a small but well-stocked kitchen at the far end. The dark wood paneling, even on the ceiling, was barely visible beneath thousands of pictures of doghouses sent from patrons all over the world.

Miniature dachshunds in ornately decorated shoeboxes, massive Newfoundlands in backyard mansions that could easily house hundreds of their smaller kin, and everything in between. A gigantic Snoopy atop his doghouse in full Red Baron fighting gear dominated the far wall. Rumor said Shulz himself had been here two owners before and drawn it.

Tables were grouped close together, some for standing and drinking, others for sitting and eating.

"Amy, sweetheart!" Two-Tall called out as they entered the bar. The perky redhead came out from behind the bar to receive a hug from Tim. Akbar got one in turn, so he wasn't complaining. Cute as could be and about his height; her hugs were better than taking most women to bed. Of course, Gerald the cook and the bar's co-owner was big enough and strong enough to squish either Tim or Akbar if they got even a tiny step out of line with his wife. Gerald was one amazingly lucky man.

Akbar grabbed a Walking Man stout and turned to assess the crowd. A couple of the air jocks were in. Carly and Steve were at a little table for two in the corner, obviously not interested in anyone's company but each others. Damn, that had happened fast. New guy on the base swept up one of the most beautiful women on the planet. One of these days he'd have to ask Steve how he'd done that. Or maybe not. It looked like they were settling in for the long haul; the big "M" was so not his own first choice.

Carly was also one of the best FBANs in the business. Akbar was a good Fire Behavior Analyst, had to be or he wouldn't have made it to first stick—lead smokie of the whole MHA crew. But Carly was something else again. He'd always found the Flame Witch, as she was often called, daunting and a bit scary besides; she knew the fire better than it did itself. Steve had latched on to one seriously driven lady. More power to him.

The selection of female tourists was especially good today, but no other smokies in yet. They'd be in soon enough...most of them had groaned awake and said they were coming as he and Two-Tall kicked their hallway doors, but not until they'd been on their way out—he and Tim had first pick. Actually some of the smokies were coming, others had told them quite succinctly where they could go—but hey, jumping into fiery hell is what they did for a living anyway, so no big change there.

A couple of the chopper pilots had nailed down a big table right in the middle of the bustling seating area: Jeannie, Mickey, and Vern. Good "field of fire" in the immediate area.

He and Tim headed over, but Akbar managed to snag the chair closest to the really hot lady with down-her-back curling dark-auburn hair at the next table over—set just right to see her profile easily. Hard shot, sitting there with her parents, but damn she was amazing. And if that was her mom, it said the woman would be good looking for a long time to come.

Two-Tall grimaced at him and Akbar offered his most© comfortable "beat out your ass" grin. But this one didn't feel

like that. Maybe it was the whole parental thing. He sat back and kept his mouth shut.

He made sure that Two-Tall could see his interest. That made Tim honor bound to try and cut Akbar out of the running.

#

Laura Jenson had spotted them coming into the restaurant. Her dad was only moments behind.

“Those two are walking like they just climbed off their first-ever horseback ride.”

She had to laugh, they did. So stiff and awkward they barely managed to move upright. They didn’t look like first-time windsurfers, aching from the unexpected workout. They’d also walked in like they thought they were two gifts to god, which was even funnier. She turned away to avoid laughing in their faces. Guys who thought like that rarely appreciated getting a reality check.

A couple minutes later, at a nod from her dad, she did a careful sideways glance. Sure enough, they’d joined in with a group of friends who were seated at the next table behind her. The short one, shorter than she was by four or five inches, sat to one side. He was doing the old stare without staring routine, as if she were so naïve as to not recognize it. His ridiculously tall companion sat around the next turn of the table to her other side.

Then the tall one raised his voice enough to be heard easily over her dad’s story about the latest goings-on at the local drone manufacturer. His company was the first one to be certified by the FAA for limited testing on wildfire and search-and-rescue overflights. She wanted to hear about it, but the tall guy had a deep voice that carried as if he were barrel-chested rather than pencil thin.

“Hell of fire, wasn’t it? Where do you think we’ll be jumping next?”

Smokies. Well, maybe they had some right to arrogance, but it didn't gain any ground with her.

"Please make it a small one," a woman who Laura couldn't see right behind her chimed in. "I wouldn't mind getting to sleep at least a couple times this summer if I'm gonna be flying you guys around."

Laura tried to listen to her dad, but the patter behind her was picking up speed.

Another guy, "Yeah, know what you mean, Jeannie. I caught myself flying along trying to figure out how to fit crows and Stellar jays with little belly tanks to douse the flames. Maybe get a turkey vulture with a Type I heavy load classification."

"At least you weren't knocked down," Jeannie again. Laura liked her voice; she sounded fun. "Damn tree took out my rotor. They got it aloft, but maintenance hasn't signed it off for fire yet. They better have it done before the next call." A woman who knew no fear—or at least knew about getting back up on the horse.

A woman who flew choppers; that was kind of cool actually. Laura had thought about smokejumping, but not very hard. She enjoyed being down in the forest too much. She'd been born and bred to be a guide. And her job at Timberline Lodge let her do a lot of that.

Dad was working on the search-and-rescue testing. Said they could find a human body heat signature, even in deep trees.

"Hey," Laura finally managed to drag her attention wholly back to her parents. "If you guys need somewhere to test them, I'd love to play. As the Lodge's activities director, I'm down rivers, out on lakes, and leading mountain hikes on most days. All with tourists. And you know how much trouble they get into."

Mom laughed, she knew exactly what her daughter meant. Laura had come by the trade right down the matrilineal line. Grandma had been a fishing and hunting tour guide out of Nome, Alaska back when a woman had to go to Alaska to do more than be a teacher or nurse. Mom had done the same until she met a man from the lower forty-eight who promised they

could ride horses almost year-round in Oregon. Laura had practically grown up on horseback, leading group rides deep into the Oregon Wilderness first with her mom and, by the time she was in her mid-teens, on her own.

They chatted about the newest drone technology for a while.

The guy with the big, deep voice finally faded away, one less guy to worry about hitting on her. But out of her peripheral vision, she could still see the other guy, the short one with the tan-dark skin, tight curly black hair, and shoulders like Atlas.

He'd teased the tall guy as they sat down and then gone silent. Not quite watching her; the same way she was not quite watching him.

Her dad missed what was going on, but her mom's smile was definitely giving her shit about it.

#

Akbar told himself he was being an idiot. He'd caught that the hot brunette was working up at Timberline Lodge leading the tourists on "activities." She'd have the pick of a very affluent crop. Tim and Vern were already double-teaming a group of windsurfers at a table closer to Tim, too far away for him to join in unless he wholly abandoned the brunette. But he wasn't willing to do that yet.

Instead, he flashed five fingers at Jeannie; she flashed back ten. They'd just bet who bought the next round, on how many minutes before Tim and Vern got the two women at the next table to join them, despite the three windsurfer guys they were already sitting with.

They pulled it off in four and he patted Jeannie in sympathy as she went to the busy bar to get a fresh round, though he opted for a lemonade so it wasn't that big a loss. Her calibration for timing the effectiveness of a pick-up line was for: "flying helicopters to fire," not: "jumping down into fire." Of course the way Jeannie looked, she didn't have to say anything to gather whoever she

wanted, but she was a choosy gal. And while he admired her long form and the fire-red streak in her shoulder-long dark hair, she'd never rung his bells or vice versa. So they'd become friends instead.

The noise level was pretty high. Outside the sun was bright and the wind fresh. That meant that three blocks away, down on the Columbia River, the wind would be snapping. And it was out of the west, so it would peel sharp, challenging waves off the river's surface because the water flow was in the other direction. With the conditions so ideal, it meant that the visitors had worked up large appetites and poured into every restaurant in town.

Again, he let his attention drift back to the conversation at the next table. Not windsurfer types. Locals. He never messed with locals because they made for tougher challenge on the female uptake and the downdraft afterwards could be awkward as hell. Your average windsurfer had two or three weeks vacation, on rare occasions a whole summer, and then they were safely back to wherever they'd come from.

"Activities Director at the Lodge," she'd said. Well, she sure didn't look like the type to be leading Bingo night. But he could see her walking through the woods. Her snug jeans revealed long, well-muscled legs. Her worn hiking boots said they were well used. Her tight figure boasted that she did a five-K trail run before Joe-tourist even rolled out for breakfast. He could picture the wind blowing that long curling hair back off her shoulders as she ran.

Akbar could get to like that mental picture of her. A lot.

"What?" She'd turned to glare right at him. He'd been staring as his mind wandered, which was always a bad tactic. He could feel Tim smirking at him for getting caught.

"Sorry," he scrambled around for a fix. He turned to her father, "I couldn't help overhearing. You're with the local drone guys?"

The man nodded carefully. The mother was practically laughing at him; okay, he wasn't being subtle at all. The hot brunette rolled her eyes.

“Well, you probably want to be talking to that guy,” Akbar pointed across the room, “if you want some real-world data.” Carly and Steve got up to leave at that moment. As they threaded by on their way toward the door, Akbar waved them in. “Steve Mercer, this is—”

“George,” Steve lit up and reached out to grab the man’s hand. “Man did your bird ever save our asses on the Tillamook Burn. We logged almost three hundred flight hours on the drones alone, never mind choppers and air tankers. I’ve got to get you some of the recordings.”

In moments they’d crowded two more chairs around the small table and Amy had delivered fresh ice teas without even being asked. George, Steve, and Carly were rapidly lost in techy esoterica that had Akbar’s eyes glazing over—too much flying, not enough fire.

In the shuffle as Steve and Carly joined the table, Akbar managed to shift his allegiance—and the angle of his chair—from the chopper pilot’s table to the brunette’s. He wanted to send a gloating look toward Tim, but figured the brunette would catch it and boot his ass.

“That was a pretty good save. Go ahead and do it,” she whispered to him. “But make your gloat a good one, because one is all you get.”

He timed his look at Tim as the brunette pretended brief attention to her BLT sandwich. Tim closed his eyes as if muttering a curse.

“You get him?”

“Got him good. Thanks.” Whoever she was, she didn’t miss much.

“So, are you going to ask my name, or just gawk at me like a love-struck bull calf?”

“Well,” Akbar settled in to enjoy himself as Amy delivered a double-burger with cheese, bacon, and a plate with a double order of onion rings. “I could be easily talked into just gawking if that works for you.”

Her mom had a great laugh. So he turned to her.

“Maybe she secretly likes being gawked at. What do you think?”

“I think, young man, that you’re right on the narrow edge of receiving a sharp poke in the ribs. So don’t stop now. I’m Jane, Jane Jenson.”

“Dad is George. Mom is Jane.” He turned back to the brunette. “Does that make you, Judy? Little brother Elroy in space school? Let me guess, you don’t have a dog, but the cat was named Astro.” He’d been ready for it; the nameless woman’s sharp poke bounced off his tightened gut muscles.

“She’s my only daughter, but you’re dead on about what she named the cat.” Jane then prompted him, “Ask her middle name.”

“Don’t!” the brunette warned.

Akbar fought the smile, he really did, but it wasn’t working. Jane was funny and obviously enjoyed torturing her daughter. George was on about something that could easily be space age and he, Carly, and Steve were paying no attention to the rest of the table. So Jane and George Jenson named her daughter *something* Judy, not quite cruel enough to make her the butt of every *The Jetsons* joke on the planet, but not wholly above it either.

The brunette groaned, then stuck her tongue out at her mother. “Laura. My name is Laura.”

“Don’t feel too bad. I’m Johnny Akbar Jepps, but everyone calls me Akbar the Great.”

She narrowed her eyes in disbelief.

“I know. I guess they love me,” he indicated the table of Tim and the fliers. “Can’t help themselves. The joke is on them though, my middle name means ‘Great.’ What parent names their kid Johnny the Great Jepps? I mean, was that the best they could do?”

“Akbar the Great?” Laura Judy Jenson was proving that she had a great smile. “So they’re calling you ‘Great the Great.’”

“Yeah.” He hit the tone of chagrin just right, as if he hated it so much but didn’t want to disappoint them, and her smile bloomed even further. *Damn!* was all he could think. For that smile, he’d

work a hell of a lot harder than he just had. Her cheeks brightened, the right one dimpled as the smile slid slightly sideways. The eyes that he'd thought were simple brown went golden-honey brown. Her head tipped slightly to the dimple side, which sent her beyond charming and right over into breathtaking.

Akbar felt as if he'd jumped out of the plane and tumbled into freefall. He wondered how much this one would hurt when he landed.

#

Two-Tall went off with a lithe little blond more Akbar's size than Tim's; she didn't even come up to his shoulder. Vern and Mickey wandered off to try the Full Sail Brewery down by the water. Laura had left with her parents and Steve and Carly. Akbar shifted his plate to rejoin Jeannie, the first smokies were just starting to drift in and would find them soon enough. A group of prime tourists jumped on the table the Jensons had just vacated, but he ignored them.

Jeannie ate one of his onion rings, then another as he worked on his burger.

"C'mon, Akbar. Don't tell me that Judy *Jetson* got to you." Clearly she'd been listening to the conversation occurring right behind her.

"Jenson," he corrected her.

"Holy shit!"

He looked up at her which he knew was a mistake as soon as he did it.

"Whoa," Jeannie's offered a low whistle. "She did. I thought no one got under your guard."

He ate an onion ring while she sipped her pint of Belgian Red and studied him.

"Washout? No, I can see that didn't happen. Did you get her number?"

He shrugged. He hadn't.

“Did she get yours?”

“Goddamn Spanish Inquisition,” Akbar muttered. Jeannie was tenacious, the same way she flew, and wasn’t going to let this one go anytime soon so he answered. “I gave it to her.”

“Did she leave it on the table?”

He felt some glimmer of hope. No, she hadn’t. Laura had taken the paper napkin bearing his phone number.