

## Chapter 1

*Guard your reserves!*” *The* spotter shouted after he’d clambered from the cockpit, over all of the smokejumpers, and finally reached the back door of the roaring DC-3 jump plane.

Krista Thorson slapped her hand over her reserve parachute to make sure it didn’t accidentally deploy when he popped open the door. A glance down the line assured her that all twelve smokejumpers in the flight were awake and doing the same.

A DC-3’s cabin wasn’t that cramped, until you piled wildland firefighting gear secure behind heavy cargo nets down one side, and a dozen fully geared up smokejumpers prone like beached whales down the other. They’d been trying to finish their night’s sleep after the dawn call-to-fire, but the wildfire was so close to base that a catnap was all any of them had gotten.

Krista and Akbar “the Great” Jepps, the lead smokie, were always first stick. It had taken Krista a decade to work up to the Number Two slot. When Tim and before him TJ had still been on the crew, she was rarely out of the plane in the first

pass—two jumpers was a typical stick for each passage of the plane over a jump spot.

It was a good, comfortable slot. Despite her constant threats to drop a tree on him and take over, she really wasn't interested in Lead; Akbar was just too damned good and she couldn't imagine jumping with anyone else.

Being Number Two in the first stick also meant that she got to test the air first, find a way down through the roaring winds so chaotic near a fire. She loved the challenge.

Fifteen minutes out from the fire they'd safety-checked each others' gear, from heavy jumpsuit pants secured at the boots so no tree branch could slip by, to parachute harness, to helmet with wire-mesh face mask. They were as ready as they could be.

Terry, Mount Hood Aviation's spotter for *Jump M1*, popped the rear door and pulled it inward. There was a slap of wind, especially where she and Akbar sat crammed at the rear of the plane—just the sort of slap that could snag a reserve parachute, then suck it and the attached smokie out the door after straining her through the metal hull.

Through the open door the smell of high mountain air and hot engine exhaust swirled about the cabin. The DC-3's big radial engines were no longer buffered by the airplane's thin hull, but now delivered their full-throated roar right into the open jump door—sweet music of the first jump of the fire season.

"Did you remember to call her this time?" Krista leaned down and shouted at Akbar. He was powerfully muscled, and over half a foot shorter than Krista's six feet plus. He was India's answer to Tom Cruise, except he was younger, fitter, and from Seattle. But just as short, which she'd usually remind him about now, but he was looking all freaked out.

"Crap!" He yanked out his cell phone as Krista laughed. He never remembered to warn his wife he was about to jump a fire and might not be able to call for days.

"You'd be lost without me, dude!"

“I’d be more lost without her,” he shouted back.

Amazing, but true.

Akbar the Great had always been a rocking firefighter—there was a reason he was the lead smokie with such an elite outfit. He’d also been the crassest of womanizers. Right until the moment he met Laura Jenson. She’d done something to him, and not just stopping his ever-growing circle of post-fire flings.

He wasn’t any less aggressive against a burn, but he was—

Krista searched for the right word.

—steadier?

Whatever it was, Laura had definitely been a good influence on Akbar. And on top of making Akbar behave, she was also a wilderness guide and expert horsewoman which made her real easy to respect. The fact that she was a totally likeable person just meant Akbar was way luckier than he deserved.

If he was a little less freaking happy all the time, he might be more tolerable. Of course, he was getting it regular from a wonderful woman, so maybe he had reason to be so goofy happy that Krista wanted to smack him sometimes.

Often.

What the hell. She smacked his shoulder hard.

“What was that for?” he shouted as he huddled over his phone.

“Just ‘cause.”

There was no way for Akbar to call now, not over the roar of engine and hundred mile-an-hour wind ripping by the door, so he sent a quick text Krista could see over his shoulder.

*Fire.*

“C’mon, dude. You been married a year and you still don’t know shit.” After a year—hell, Laura was a smart woman—after the first twenty minutes, she must have known what sort of a man Akbar was. Didn’t mean that Krista couldn’t tease him about it anyway.

“What?”

“You gotta tell her you love her or something. Most girls want to hear stuff like that.”

He nodded about six times as if trying to embed that in his memory, but she knew it wouldn't stick.

“Now!”

“Oh, right.” He scrambled out a quick “Hugs” on his phone and looked pretty pleased with himself. Sad.

Then he glanced up at her, as he stuffed away his phone. “Not you, though. I forget that Mama Krista is not like other girls.”

Krista shrugged. All that romantic, mushy stuff had never done much for her. Still, if she hadn't learned to ignore that specific phrase from hearing it so many times that she was immune to it—mostly—she'd consider sending Akbar down without his parachute.

Not like other girls. She was too goddamn tall, broad-shouldered enough that guys (at least the ones with a death wish) asked if she played front four on the football team, and she was stronger than any of them. *Not like other girls*, had plagued her since birth. If she—

Krista shoved her growing anger aside, pissed that it had slid up around her guard yet again.

“Dropping,” Terry shouted from where he'd been leaning out the door and assessing the terrain and fire below. He'd been shouting instructions to the pilot over the headset.

Akbar turned off his phone and stuffed it into his personal gear bag along with his food and water. Then they both scooted up close beside the spotter.

Terry kept to the leading edge of the open door—he had a solid safety line snapped to his harness so that he was secure despite leaning halfway out the door. He also wore a parachute just in case, but not the full jump gear—if he ever had to bail out over a forest, his landing was gonna hurt.

He tossed a trio of crepe paper streamers. They were a dozen feet long, a foot wide, and weighted so that they'd fall at least a little like a smokie in a parachute.

Krista looked out at the evergreen forest and the fire. *Jump MI* flew just fifteen hundred feet over a classic Pacific Northwest vista. The Cascades were sharp mountains, heaving multiple rocky crags up past eight thousand feet. And today's fire placed the massive rounded peak of Mt. Rainier's fourteen-thousand feet in the foreground. The early morning sunlight glittering off the glacier-covered dormant volcano was almost painfully bright despite her sunglasses.

At the mountain's foot lay steep ridge-and-valley country covered in a solid carpet of dark summer green, near enough black with the shadows of the sun's low angle. Some maple and alder, but these slopes were mostly spruce and two-hundred foot Douglas fir just waiting to snag a smokie who didn't nail the drop zone.

The fire was a dozen acres and growing aggressively up three different valleys at once. The tail of the fire was down low in a creek-bed valley running between the two ridges which told Krista it was probably human caused. Lightning fires typically started up high and often in a dozen spots at once. Multiple points of origin low in the valley would point to arson. Single point of origin down in the valley meant it was a runaway campfire or some idiot hunter with exploding targets.

The black, red, and gold streamers—the MHA logo colors—fell cleanly for the first five hundred feet. Then they jinked hard to the south. One of the streamers spun off northwest. The other two practically tied themselves in a knot. Then for the last five hundred feet the pair of streamers shot back north, eventually disappearing into the trees almost exactly straight below where they'd been tossed out.

Terry looked up at them, "You saw?" he shouted.

They both nodded dutifully.

"I make it a hard ride with almost no drift overall. Your drop zone is that small clearing just south of the tail of the fire. Watch for catching the northerly drift current taking you right into the fire."

Krista leaned out to look back at the spot Terry had picked out. A hundred-foot wide hole in the middle of two hundred-foot trees. A real squeak when flying a thirty-foot wide ram chute.

“Race your ass to dead center,” she yelled at Akbar. “First round of drinks at the Doghouse.”

He held up a hand to accept the challenge and she high-fived it; she loved free beer. He might be married-weirdo-in-love, but he was a fantastic jump partner—even if she was more accurate than he was. The boy just never learned.

The plane circled back and started the climb to jump altitude at three thousand feet above the ground—fifteen hundred feet of free fall in the first five seconds and sixty seconds of madness after the chute deployed. It was the best ride a girl could find. She and Akbar did final four-point checks on their own parachute controls: harness secure, release ripcord across chest, cutaway for the main chute if there was a problem, reserve release at hand.

“In the door,” Terry yelled.

Krista glanced one last time at the other smokies. They were all plastered up against the small round windows to see what they could of the fire and streamers. In their bulky jumpsuits and heavy gear, they were awkward and looked utterly ridiculous everywhere except jumping on a fire.

Most of the crew were seasoned MHA regulars that she’d spent a half dozen seasons jumping with. But there were also one rookie and two snookies—second year rookies—she’d be keeping an eye on. MHA never had a true rookie, because the Forest Circus—as the U.S. Forest Service was universally called among smokies—or Bureau of Land Management trained them for a year or two first. But even five-year jump veterans like the newest hire, Evan Greene, were dubbed “rookies” when they joined MHA.

She’d made a point of running practice jumps with every new recruit to Mount Hood Aviation’s smokejumper team and

hadn't seen a thing to complain about. The snookies in this load were good, two years each jumping with the BLM before shifting to her outfit.

But Rookie Evan Greene from the Montana Zulies was a cut above. That had been clear from the moment he'd stepped into the parachute loft at MHA's small jump base high in the foothills of Oregon's Mount Hood—eleven thousand feet of dormant volcano loomed over their camp.

That day the loft had contained a milling hoard of returning jumpers, packing chutes after their pre-season re-certification jumps. They'd been playing grab-ass and catching up on who had done what with whom off season. Riverboat had made a couple season's worth of pay at the poker table, and Crash had spent the winter skiing and teaching classes for eligible snow bunnies up at Sun Valley. Most had jumped bushfires in Australia with Krista last year and had only a month off, but still she made them re-certify to be on the MHA roster.

And even in that high-jump crowd, Evan Greene had stood out like a sore thumb, well, a not-sore thumb. Damn but the bastard was dark-eyed and handsome even if he didn't lord it about. He was pure business during the interview, the check ride and jump, and all of the last three weeks of pre-season conditioning.

He never ran at the front of the pack on the daily grinds, though it was clear he easily could have. Instead, he hung next to someone having trouble and cheered them along until they did more than they thought they could. Exactly the kind of guy MHA was always looking for.

Even now, sitting at the end of the lineup on the plane, Evan stood out. He had the big, powerful build most smokies developed, but he also exuded a confidence that was hard to look away from. No way was Krista going to get involved with any rookie, but if she was, he'd definitely look like Evan Greene. Krista returned her attention to her upcoming jump, at least most of it. She could feel the rookie watching her. Only

natural, everyone always watched the first stick jumpers all the way down to see what their own ride was going to be like.

Akbar shifted from kneeling just inside the door beside Terry until he sat in the doorway, his feet out in the wind and dangling over empty space.

Krista moved in to stand close behind him. MHA Smokies jumped in pairs, one from sitting and one from standing. On some planes sticks could be three or four in a row rushing out the door, but the old DC-3 simply didn't lend itself to that between the low door and the tail section not far past the door.

Just like always she nudged her boots against Akbar's butt as if she was going to kick him out early. He kept his hands braced on the inside edge of the doorway, but he barked out, "Don't even!" as he did every time. Part of their jump ritual, it brought good luck.

Terry stuck his head around the corner of the doorway and looked out past Akbar. He yelled something to the pilot over the headset and the DC-3 sideslipped to a new alignment on the drop zone.

"Standby."

Akbar shifted his grip low in the door, now ready to yank himself out the door rather than making sure he stayed in. She did the same higher up on the doorframe.

Terry raised his hand and Krista focused on that alone.

Terry slapped Akbar's shoulder and he yanked himself out the door. Krista was moving before Akbar's weight was even off the toes of her boots. She yanked herself out and down to clear the tail section.

In moments, she was flying.

# # #

Evan Greene leaned up against the DC-3's window and watched as Akbar and Krista tumbled down to earth. Under his breath he counted with them:

“Jump-thousand. Look-thousand,” he could see them spinning about to scan in all directions. “Reach-thousand,” too far away now to see their hands on their ripcords. “Wait-thousand.” “Pull-thousand,” and their chutes bloomed in unison, big rectangular ram chutes in black, red, and gold. Krista floated well above Akbar.

When the plane circled in the opposite direction, he lost sight of them. The seasoned MHA smokies must have known their pilot’s habits because they were on the move before Evan sensed the beginning of the turn. They all shifted to the other side of the plane to keep an eye on the jumpers. Which left him a crappy view over Ox’s shoulder. Couldn’t see much at all.

“Wild, rookie,” Gustav the Ox teased him. “Don’t know if you can handle this one. Maybe you should stay aboard rather than risking that purdy face of yours in them big, bad trees.”

“Willing to put money on that?” Evan’s rookie year had been five years ago with the Zulies out of Missoula, Montana, one of the hottest smoke teams in the Forest Service. He’d been in solid for every summer, but the winters off the fire were hard. He didn’t like the downtime—always spent the winters looking for something to do with his time. He didn’t do “stop” worth crap.

MHA had promised more, they jumped off-season to the southern hemisphere fires. “Sold out” some of the Zulies had accused him, for his leaving the USFS and joining a civilian outfit. Often the same ones who’d teased him in public had pulled him aside in private and made him promise to report back.

“Hell, boy,” Ox drawled out in his best country-hick accent. “Your gear don’t even smell of wood smoke.”

Protesting about the fact that MHA had issued him brand new gear would have no effect whatsoever, so he didn’t bother.

“Besides,” Ox sneered at him, “You’re a rookie. We’ve got a rule against taking rookie money...except at poker.”

“Don’t play,” Evan did, but not well enough to take on a table of smokejumpers. “You play pool and you’re on.”

“Done!” Ox agreed as the line shuffled forward.

Evan had bought his first car by pool sharking in Boise. He’d show Ox a thing or two for calling him rookie. Even if it was pretty standard hazing for the “new guy,” after five years jumping fire, it got under his skin a bit.

They were sixth and last stick, placing Evan at the very tail of the line. He tried not to take it personally, but he did. He’d always been in the first few sticks with the Zulies, often jumping lead on secondary fires. Was it because he was once again a rookie after five years of jumping that he was at the back or was it really just the chance of the rotation after the first stick, as the MHA jumpers insisted?

As the plane circled around to drop the next stick, Evan delayed long enough to get a good look out the window at Akbar and Krista circling down into the hole in the trees. Akbar made it down, stalling his chute hard and doing a roll between two trees at the edge of the small clearing. Clean jump.

Krista had done his initial interview and been his test-jump partner when he’d come down to Mount Hood Aviation’s base camp just south of Hood River, Oregon.

He’d remembered the feeling as she yanked on his gear during the buddy check, making sure everything was in place and properly attached. She’d given tips that he hadn’t learned in five years of jumping with the Zulies—little things, so small they barely mattered—which told him more about MHA than anything else had. Even the tiniest bit safer mattered deeply to these people.

Evan had been terribly self-conscious as he’d checked Krista’s gear. Female smokejumpers were rare, it was just too hard physically. IHCs, sure. More and more women were fighting fire from the ground crews. Tough hikes, long days, and hard work, it’s what the Interagency Hotshot Crews were good at and some of the women did great.

Smokies didn’t fight fire, they battled it. It was the Special Forces posting of the civilian world. That’s why he gravitated

to jumping fire after six years in the Green Berets—a past he did not advertise. And before that there was the past he did his best to forget. Better everyone though he'd been hatched out as a smokejumper from the first day.

When women did make the jump lineup—and the Zulies had a couple—they were about as sexy as battering rams. All grit and determination and in your face about it. Like they were trying to be more macho than the guys and always being aware that they were the outsider long after the guys had forgotten about it.

The next two sticks jumped and the ride down was a wild one, but he watched them to the ground trying to map the shifting of the unseen winds in his head to plan his own route down.

Krista Thorson was something else, first stick of jumpers at an outfit like MHA said that it wasn't honorary either. There were women trying to make Special Forces, but they just didn't have the upper body strength to qualify no matter how driven they were.

Krista would have had no problems there. She was built on a grand scale. Tall enough to look him square in the eye, broad of frame, big chested, and sassy as hell. Her powerful shoulders emphasized by the brush of light-blond hair—a smooth fall that set off a great face and the bluest eyes he'd ever seen.

She had a fast wit, a mouth that was always on the verge of a laugh, and she moved like a Master Sergeant—with the casual power of someone who knew that the battle wouldn't even begin without her there. Master Sergeants were called the backbone of the military for a reason and Krista was clearly the Number Two smokie for the same one.

He checked his gear for about the tenth time. He was always a little extra paranoid, but it served him well as a Special Forces Green Beret and so far it had served him well as a smokie.

Krista was not his usual type; not at all. He typically went for the long and slender ones who populated the smokejumper bars and the Special Forces bars before that.

But he'd practically blushed when checking Krista's parachute harness just above those big breasts visible even through the jumpsuit. He couldn't help wondering what it would be like to wrestle with that much woman, both her confidence and her body.

And his body's reaction to those thoughts inside full jump gear was decidedly uncomfortable—the material too thick and the jump harness too tight to let him rearrange anything from the outside.

The next to last stick jumped. He took one last look out the window before scooting up behind Ox.

Krista had floated down to land dead center in the deep hole among the trees. Tuck and roll, then she popped back to her feet and was standing on Akbar's collapsed chute as if counting coup.

Damn but she could fly.