



Full Blaze (Firehawks Book 2)

By M. L. Buchman

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These wilderness firefighters battle more than flames

The elite fire experts of Mount Hood Aviation fly into places even the CIA can't penetrate.

She's just jumped square into the heart of the blaze

When Australian helicopter pilot Jeannie Clark rescues wildfire photographer Cal Jackson from a raging burnover, she doesn't know she's bringing aboard a firebrand. Cal is quickly recruited for MHA's covert operations that reach far beyond the flames. Together Jeannie and Cal are assigned to an overseas operation with a lot more at risk than burning trees. And they'll need all the skill, love, and trust they can muster if they're going to survive the heat of this jungle battle.

Praise for *Pure Heat*, A Firehawks Novel:

"Meticulously researched, hard-hitting, and suspenseful... Buchman writes with beauty and simmering passion." —*Publishers Weekly*, Starred Review

"Buchman's adept use of source material will leave readers awestruck that a wonderful love story can be so seamlessly woven in among technical details...Poignant and touching." —*Long and Short Reviews*

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Editorial Review

Review

"The elements of *Full Blaze* combine marvelously into a terrific adventure with a lot of heart." - ***Reading Reality***

"M.L. Buchman's fantastic imagery and exquisite detail brings the story to life-you can almost feel the burn as the flames wash over our storyline heroes." - ***The Reading Cafe***

"The Firehawks series continues with a richly detailed and pulse-pounding read that balances fast-paced drama and romance. Buchman knows how to make each of his characters unique and interesting, and Cal and Jeannie are just that. Their tender romance is flawlessly blended with landscapes of blazing fires and heart-stopping life-or-death scenes. Buchman again pens an excellent read!" - ***RT Book Reviews. 4 1/2 Stars***

"FULL BLAZE has it all; suspense, hot-hot romance and as much edge-of-the-seat excitement you could possibly ask for." - ***Fresh Fiction***

About the Author

M.L. Buchman has over 25 novels in print. His military romantic suspense books have been named Barnes & Noble and NPR "Top 5 of the year" and *Booklist* "Top 10 of the Year." In addition to romance, he also writes thrillers, fantasy, and science fiction.

In among his career as a corporate project manager he has: rebuilt and single-handed a fifty-foot sailboat, both flown and jumped out of airplanes, designed and built two houses, and bicycled solo around the world.

He is now making his living full-time as a writer, living on the Oregon Coast with his beloved wife. He is constantly amazed at what you can do with a degree in Geophysics. You may keep up with his writing at mlbuchman.com.

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Chapter 1

Cal Jackson stared up at the wall of flame eating its way toward him through the forest. He was always tempting fate one step too far. Now he was way past the second step, as well as the third. He was standing in the foreign land of totally screwed. In his seven years of fighting wildfires and five more photographing them, he'd never been this far over the line. Not even close.

He'd ridden the edge a lot since he was a testosterone-laden teen. It had earned him his fair share of cold slaps from ticked-off women, but maybe more than his share of warm and friendly nights. It had also led to numerous interesting opportunities to travel for both work and play, so he'd learned to take that risk without really thinking about it.

He tried not to take that second step very often; it was his warning that he was pushing the limits. But dancing along the edge of that step was what had won him so many of his awards. Though the Pulitzer for photography and "best of" for World Press Photo still remained out of reach, he'd bagged a lot of awards including the cover on National Geographic. And Time, twice.

Out here, way past the second step, the Grindstone Canyon Fire was in full-throated roar. The sound throbbed against his body with bass notes that actually shook his inner organs. He'd stood close beside the tracks when two-hundred-car freight trains had flown past at full speed. This was louder. Nor did it conveniently pass by and Doppler into the distance; this train of fire had him clear in its sights.

The air was growing so hot that it hurt to breathe. His acute sense of smell for smoke, burning pitch, and carbon had long since been overwhelmed by the saturation of them in the air. He'd embedded tight with a crew of hotshot firefighters who were fast losing ground against the wildfire despite their best efforts. It happened that way. Fighting fire was a delicate back-and-forth dance between flame and attacker, almost like a hip-hop advance and retreat, attack and counterattack by both sides of the...hoedown.

Hoedown? Where had he come up with that? Third foster father. Yuck!

In one way the comparison was appropriate, as it was with the rakes, Pulaskis, and even hoes that a hotshot crew used to battle the flames. Not hoedown, but rather... His brain was trying to work out what hip-hop dancers called that battle of dance, power, and sensuality-that had to be about the stupidest damn thought to have as his last on earth.

The Grindstone in southern California was probably the last big fire of the year in the United States. The Pacific Northwest was already getting rain, and Colorado had snow, though that hadn't slowed down the Fern Lake Fire back in 2012. He'd won two awards and gotten national headlines on that one for his piece on fighting wildfires when the supply tanks and rivers froze and the helicopters couldn't get at the water to fight the flames.

The Southeast had just been soaked by a really serious trio of hurricanes. So this year California was last in the hot seat, and the fires above Santa Barbara were doing their best to take back the hills for Mother Nature. It had started in the same area of Rattlesnake Canyon Park as the lethal Rattlesnake Fire of 1953 that killed fifteen firefighters. Though this time it was started by lightning rather than a psycho arsonist.

You'd think he'd have grabbed a clue from the historical setting, though he'd been no better with history than most of the subjects in school, except fighting and photography. With maturity, he'd added "fire" as an adjective to both of them. He now knew fire history as well as any hotshot walking the hills, except for this time when it should have warned him. There hadn't been a bad burn here in more than sixty years, so it was due.

The hotshot crew he'd been with had been in the heat for a week, driving ahead and then retreating-dancing that careful strategic dance against the fire. Less than two minutes ago the crew had taken off down a narrow track leading across a cliff face and onto a rolling slope that led down into the distant valley. Their escape route was clean. He'd hesitated an extra fifteen seconds to get a shot of a massive fig tree, over eighty feet tall, being ripped up by fire-generated winds and tossed aside like a matchstick. Fifteen lousy seconds.

The problem was that the fire had cast the flaming tree down right across his escape route. The tree not only lay across the path, but it was catching all of the surrounding material on fire as well. The crew looked at him helplessly across the gap.

The notch canyon that separated them was too far for a rope cast, and the vertical walls that plunged down to either side of his position required a level of mountaineering skill that included hammers and pitons, neither of which he was carrying. He carefully eyed a ledge about ten feet below, but could think of no way to get down to it. Far too narrow a landing to risk a jump. Yet.

He could see the crew boss on the radio, but with the fire's roar, Cal couldn't hear him even though his own

radio handset was in its pouch right against his shoulder and the volume was turned up to full.

The smoke blotted out the boss just as he was about to make a hand sign of some sort. A glance upward into the smoke canopy told him that no helicopters would be able to save his sorry behind. The mushroom cloud of smoke-looking like a nuclear blast, it was so intense-rose ten thousand feet above the California landscape would block any line of approach.

The ravine to the south was clogged with fire, and the one to the north was now fully lit by the thrown tree, its branches ablaze like a thousand-armed candelabra. The two ravines met to the west. The only way out was east-and there raged the beast.

The narrow ledge of his final demise was covered in a few dogwood and valley oak trees, tall grasses, and dense manzanita brush. When the fire rolled over this site, it would burn hot. Hot in the same way it had burned over the nineteen-man crew in Yarnell, Arizona, the air so superheated it had burned right through their foil emergency shelters. It had done that despite the circular clearing they'd cut around themselves. And he didn't even carry a chain saw to try to make a clearing. All he had were his cameras.

He backed to the edge of the precipice and then turned once more to look at the flame. He wasn't even conscious of his actions as he lifted his new Canon Mark III camera, found the frame, shot the photo. Zoomed back. Found the next, shot it. The beast was close. He'd only once been so close to the heart of the firestorm. During his days as a member of a hotshot crew, they'd have been long gone before the heart of the fire rolled this close. The camera was actually heating in his hands, prickly hot to hold.

Too close! That was it. He dropped the camera into his bag and pulled out his old workhorse 6D body with the 28 mm wide-angle lens. No way he'd risk a lens change with all of the dust and ash in the air.

There! He could see the image coming together that would make a cover photo. Another prizewinner was almost here. Just a few more seconds... If he could just...

A metal shape zipped by the lens, fast. He didn't see what it was, but some instinct had him pressing the shutter. He flicked back to the image.

On his viewfinder a winged drone a half-dozen feet in length, painted black with gold-and-orange flames, had flown between him and the fire. It had a bold "MHA" emblazoned on its side.

Some comfort that was. All it meant was that someone from Mount Hood Aviation was going to have the award-winning photo of the journalist who burned alive while clutching his camera like a damned idiot. All because he'd had to take that third step and now couldn't wrench back from it.

Cal was going to make a lousy Cinderella, no pretty gown rising from the ashes for him. But he was sure going to end up as a cinder. Another thirty seconds and he'd have to take his chances inside the foil shelter, though he'd sworn he'd never do that again.

Maybe his life was supposed to pass before his eyes right about now, but he hoped not. He'd beaten the first sixteen years of his life down with every ounce of a firefighter's willpower until they didn't exist. The time since had been mostly good, but with the way his luck was running today, he'd get to see those early days before he'd named himself Calvin Jackson.

Some idiot part of him started to raise the camera again, but then he stopped. His cameras were going to cook right along with him, even if he threw himself over them like a Marine covering a grenade to save his buddies. For once he just looked at the wall of flame. Its heart so hot it glowed gold as the fire swarmed up

tree trunks six stories tall with a single breath, sheathing each tree in a cloak of flame just six inches and fifteen hundred degrees thick. The roar deepened as if gathering its breath. So loud that-

The sharp blast of a voice over a loudspeaker not ten feet behind him so startled Cal that he almost stumbled off the ledge. Completely masked by the roar of the fire and with hundred-foot flames less than thirty yards away, a helicopter had come to hover behind him. It wore the same paint job as the drone.

A glance up showed the rotor blades shimmering in a lethal arc just a few feet above him and no break in the smoke-cloud cover. The hotshot crew was still invisible across the ravine. But far down below, right off the narrow spit of cliff he was perched upon, he could see the terrain. The pilot had flown up through a hole underneath the smoke and ash cloud.

"Get aboard, you bloody git!" the speaker screamed at him. He wouldn't have heard it if it weren't less than ten feet away and aimed right at him.

The chopper hung just out of reach, hovering with its open side door toward him. Over his shoulder he could see that the spinning rotor disk was within a foot or so of a stout oak tree. They couldn't fly any closer to him. The chopper didn't even have skids to grab on to like they always did in the movies, just wheels.

The cargo bay door was an open four-by-four-foot square of salvation, hanging a half-dozen feet away over a hundred-yard drop. He stuffed both cameras into the padded bag, snapped it shut, and chucked the bag through the door toward the rear so it wouldn't go out the other side, which was also open. Then, squatting to make the leap while the chopper bounced in the roiling air currents, he jumped into space.

He landed mostly inside the door. Far enough to drag himself the rest of the way. He spotted a rope line, made sure it was secured to something, then snapped the D ring on the front of his safety harness onto it so that he was now secure.

"Good to go," he shouted to the pilot. There was no way he could be heard. The freight train was screaming toward them, barely ten yards from the rotor tips.

The pilot, flying alone, risked a quick glance back, but was skilled enough for the chopper to remain rock stable despite the turbulent environment.

Cal only had long enough to get the impression of a narrow face and mirrored shades wrapped in a large, earmuff pilot's headset. Seeing he was aboard, the pilot rolled the chopper hard left and dove down through the dwindling smoke hole. He caught the camera bag as it skidded across the deck plating.

A glance up at the cliff showed a tongue of flame now reaching out to grab where the chopper had hovered only moments before.

Now that he was safe, the adrenaline rush kicked out hard. He'd fought fires from California to Alaska, and he'd photographed them in Brazil, Russia, and a dozen other places. He'd never before had his hands shake so badly that he couldn't even open the bag to make sure the cameras were okay. All he could do was clench it to his chest and let the shakes run through him.

"Yeah, Ground Command. This is Hawk Oh-two, I got him. You can release your crew to the next site."

Jeannie Clark clicked off her mike and the one-word acknowledgment came right back. She was bummed. She'd finally found a flaw with her beautiful new Firehawk. Well, almost new. The machine had done a

couple tours in Iraq first, but it had been totally renovated, repainted, and reconfigured with a big belly tank for dumping retardant on wildfires. It was new to her. Her boss and MHA's lead pilot, Emily Beale, had only just certified her in this type last month. And the chopper was also new to Mount Hood Aviation's "Hoodies," one of the country's premier firefighters-for-hire contractors. It was only the second load-rated Type I helicopter in their inventory.

Until recently, she'd only been certified in the midsize Type II Twin Huey 212 and the tiny Type III MD500, both much-lower-capacity crafts. The Firehawk was built on the Sikorsky Black Hawk frame and could lift a massive thousand gallons of retardant or water, about four and a half tons. That could make a serious dent in a blaze except when Mama Nature was really kicking up her heels with Papa Fire. That was what her Australian friend Dale always called them, as if they were part of his Aboriginal Dreamtime creation mysticism. She'd looked up the expression and it wasn't, but she'd kept using it even after coming to America. People always looked at her cross-eyed when she used it, so she now kept it to herself.

The thing was, with her MD500, she could have scooted right onto that cliff edge instead of hovering out in space. Had to give the guy some points-at three hundred feet up a cliff, he'd jumped right out with no hesitation. That said something about guts, or desperation. She'd half expected him to freeze and die there. Even three more seconds and she'd have had to bug out and leave him there to burn.

She continued to maneuver hard and fast, trying to get down and out of the smoke-clear hole before it totally closed. Driving straight out through the ash wall that surrounded her on all sides had two bad things going for it. First, you couldn't see squat-even radar got dicey in some of the heat and ash plumes. Second, her air filters would ingest enough ash to clog them up good. Then she'd have to go back to base and wait while they were serviced. Assuming her engines kept running long enough even to do that. Doing an autorotate landing into the suburbs of Santa Barbara wasn't her idea of a good time.

Still, she might have to return to base because Mister Brainless Got-himself-trapped was hurt.

"You okay back there?"

In answer he squeezed between the pilot and copilot seats, stepping carefully over the center console despite the lunges of the chopper due to her maneuverings. He also was smart enough not to bump the cyclic control between his knees as he slid into the seat and buckled up. Only once he was buckled in did he release the line attached to his harness and toss it toward the rear. That spoke of training.

The acrid scent of char and smoke was a slap to her face, it radiated off his black-smeared yellow Nomex fire suit. He was dressed like a hotshot right down to the foil shelter on his hip, but all he carried was a padded bag clutched tight against his chest.

She pointed a finger toward a dangling headset without taking her hands off the dual controls of cyclic and collective. Especially not with the cliff still a bare two rotor widths away, 107 feet and four inches, give or take the odd boulder.

His hands were fumbling as he pulled on the headset. Adrenaline letdown. She'd seen it before, had it herself when a tree had exploded below her MD500 a few months ago and taken out the tail rotor. Crash landing in the middle of the New Tillamook Burn had been a wild ride. He finally got the headset pulled on, once he figured out he had to remove his hard hat first.

"What the hell is in that bag," she asked him over the intercom, "that you had to throw it in before yourself? Are you berko, Yank?" Didn't the guy have any idea about personal safety first?

"Did I?" He glanced down at the bag as if it might know the answer. Then he pulled its strap over his head, tangling it in the headset's cord. Took him a bit to straighten it all out before he answered.

"It's my cameras." He turned to face her and did that standard freeze double-take.

When Jeannie glanced over, he was grinning at her. Oh crap! She knew that look. Another smoke jock thinking, "What's a woman doing flying a big nasty helicopter like this? And how far can I get with her?" The answers were: she'd busted her ass for years to get here, and he would get absolutely nowhere. She was half sorry that Steve's drone had found a safe way in to him and she'd rescued him.

"Pretty damn stupid of me, now that you mention it." His voice was deep and wry over the intercom.

Well, okay, he got another half a point for not saying the expected. Add that to the one he'd earned jumping into space to reach her chopper, and he was still nowhere. In her personal system, it took at least ten points to get a date, though this guy might need twenty.

"Huh. It's not like I wasn't already wearing the strap across my chest. I never really understood a buddy's story until this moment. He told me about being at a forward air base in Iraq when he heard a shell coming in. Says he knew he was dead and it was too late to move, so he chucked his bag out of their foxhole to save the pictures he'd taken."

Damn, but he had a nice voice for storytelling, all deep and warm. No way that was worth another point. Couldn't be.

"Ralph figured they might even support his wife awhile after he died, if the cameras were recovered. But the damn mortar round missed their barricaded position and landed square on the bag. Blew six grand of cameras and lenses and a month of dangerous work to smithereens; didn't do anything else other than make a hole in the dirt. Guess I thought the same thing on some level."

Jeannie shook her head and paid attention to the smoke wall. It was thinning near the ground, but the air at the lower edge of the plume still had a mind of its own. And they were getting down into power-line territory. Power lines loved the taste of fresh rotor blade and always threw a little power party over roasted downed chopper.

Married. Figures. How many jerks went voluntarily and died on Everest or in some godforsaken hole, leaving behind a family while in pursuit of their sport? Military was different. If you were in the service, like her brother Randall in the Royal Australian Air Force, and the RAAF said, "Go there," you went. It's what you'd signed up for.

This joker wasn't even fire crew; he was a photographer. He'd literally jumped off the cliff without a safety net, and he'd saved his camera bag first.

"Calvin Jackson, at your service. Everyone calls me Cal."

"Got a twin brother named Hobbes? Did people call you Calvin and Hobbes? Are you the evil one?"

"No brother." For a just a moment his voice was hard and clipped, then he asked, "And you are?" His voice was abruptly all smooth in that way guys always thought was so charming.

"Smart enough to be your worst nightmare, mate," Jeannie replied. She'd met a hundred guys like him, maybe a thousand. Wife at home, chatting up the pretty pilot in the field. She could see them homing in on her from ten thousand feet away. Ever since her days flying in the Australian bush. She'd wing into some

remote cattle station, with emergency supplies or a doctor aboard, and every puppy-dog lonely cowhand would start circling around the Sheila pilot.

That silenced him.

Before he could find a new tack, she cut him off. "Are you okay? Or do I have to stop this run to get you to some medico?" She managed to clear the bottom of the plume before she reached the Santa Barbara suburb crammed up against the base of the foothills. One of the engine crews waved while spraying down houses against the flames approaching from another draw. She rocked her cyclic left and right to return the wave as she flew out.

"I'm fine. Do what you need to do."

"You mean what I was doing before I had to fly up and rescue your sorry behind for your wife's sake?"

"Yeah, that. Except I'm not married."

Jeannie headed for the nearest swimming pool, a lot of those in this high-end neighborhood, then glanced over at him. Cal had settled in comfortably, looking out the window like any normal rubbernecking tourist, not like some freaked-out survivor of a close brush with death. Good recovery time. His smoke-smeared face actually highlighted his light brown eyes and bright smile. The man was several points worth of handsome and clearly knew it.

He turned to meet her gaze.

"Biding your time? It's not going to work on me," she informed him.

"Damn, and I had such hopes what with not knowing your name and all."

Okay, she'd give him another half point for funny. She had a weak spot for funny, not that she'd ever admit that to this man.

Cal alternated between watching the nameless pilot and admiring her skill.

She was very easy to watch. While the heavy gear covered her frame, what he could see was exceptional. Fine-fingered hands that rested lightly on the controls. She flew with no hesitation, absolute confidence in what she was doing.

It was her face that was so captivating. Not some pretty girl, though she was beautiful. Her face had character. He'd bet that behind her mirrored shades her eyes were dark. They'd be dark, thoughtful, even penetrating, staring right through any bullshit. Her face wasn't merely narrow. The features were delicate, sophisticated. He liked that; it looked good on her.

Her hair, which he hadn't noticed at first because of the high-backed pilot seat, was great. It was thick, dark brown, and streamed down behind the earmuffs of the headset in a wind-tousled cascade past her shoulders.

She leaned over to look out the bubble window built into the door.

He did the same on his side. The upper half of the door was a Plexiglas window that bulged outward enough for him to stick his head into it and look straight down. They were hovering twenty feet or so over someone's

swimming pool. Lawn furniture skittered away in every direction beneath the downward blast of the rotor wash.

But they weren't descending any farther.

He glanced over at her and noted a dark red streak down the back of her long hair, reaching down past her shoulder blades, heart-of-fire red. He had the recent experience to remind himself of how accurately she'd reproduced the color. It looked like a home dye job by a woman skilled at doing things for herself, but it was also cute and worked on her. She was craning her neck to look toward the stern.

He looked back out his window and down. A six-inch snorkel hose hung twenty feet down into the pool. Even as he watched, he could hear the pumps kick on. Despite being at the other end of the hose, they vibrated the airframe against his feet on the deck plates. A swirl of water formed around the jet pump as it drove water up the snorkel hose. The chopper felt as if it was settling or perhaps stabilizing as it sucked up the load.

"How much can you hold?"

"A thousand gallons at this altitude. Minus a hundred for the foam tank I have rigged in the stern and minus thirty more for you." She said it matter-of-factly, but he could hear the insult.

He didn't feel the least bit guilty-too damn glad to be alive. This time when he looked over, he noticed more than the color of her hair. Her position, twisted to look out and down at the pool, revealed a trim waist despite the heavy jacket she wore. He took another bet with himself that in addition to warm brown eyes, she'd have a light form, making an even nicer package. And she made her living floating like a vapor through the air. It reminded him of the old song about the girl with the light brown hair.

"I dream of Jeannie with the dark red hair," he sang lightly.

Jeannie jerked around to stare at the photographer chap.

"How did you know my name? And it's 'with the bright blue hair.'"

"Because it, uh, used to be blue? No, because it never was blue." He laughed at the joke. "Sure. How did I miss that? Didn't know your name. I just liked how you fit the song, floating on the smoke of the fire."

The jet pump whined as it sucked air. Turning once more to the window, she descended to get the lower end of the snorkel back in the water and watched the fill gauge. Five more seconds to full. She shut off at 920 gallons. And-done. Retracting the snorkel onto the hose reel and rising back into the air, she made sure that she stayed clear of chimneys, tall trees, and power lines.

No one had ever gotten that right. Her hair had never been blue. She'd put in the red streak after her first flight against fire. The woman who'd certified her in Australia had said Jeannie was so good that she must have a fire-red streak down her back. She'd showed up with it the next day and flown that way ever since.

The thing about the blue had always been her little joke, a line to keep guys at a distance. And it had always worked to make them look foolish or confused, occasionally ticking them off, which worked just as well. But not Cal Jackson. He'd done it with fewer clues than most. That had to be worth another point, though she gave it up reluctantly.

She called Mark Henderson, flying air attack command in the Beech Baron up at seven thousand feet. "Air attack, this is Hawk Oh-two with a full load of water and foam...and a passenger. Where do you want me?"

She listened to the directions and grinned at the cooing sound in the background. His one-year-old daughter would be curled up in her tiny car seat flying copilot beside him-the team's most junior member.

The hotshot crew that Cal had been with had repositioned to cut a firebreak across a feeder of fire reaching north along an overgrown greenway. The residents hadn't dead-limbed trees or cleared brush, despite warnings, even though the greenway reached deep into the rich-people suburb. The ever-growing urban-forest interface was always risky, but an untended one was just asking for what you deserved. And then they wondered why their homes burned. Jeannie was instructed to follow Emily Beale in Hawk Oh-one to give the hotshots a hand.

"I can drop you back in with your hotshot crew, if you want," Jeannie told Cal over the intercom. "We're headed over to give them a hand."

"I'm fine where I am, if that's okay with you. They're probably tired of me anyway."

"Great. So now I'm saddled with your deadweight?" She climbed to six hundred feet above ground level, turning to a heading of one-two-zero, and spotted Emily setting up for her attack run a half mile ahead.

"I know it's a burden, but I'm easy."

"Well, I'm not." What idiot part of her brain decided to add sexual innuendo to this conversation? It wasn't the sort of thing she ever did.

She heard a camera-shutter click sound over the headset. She looked over, right into a big, fat camera lens barely two feet away. She heard another click.

"Cut that out!" Even as she opened her mouth, she heard a third click.

And then he laughed aloud. "Oh, we gotta frame that one."

Turning away, she lined up on her attack run, then checked in on the hotshots' frequency for final guidance. Her best option would be to just ignore the man in the copilot seat. She wished that was easier to do.

Cal had enjoyed flustering her. She was so smooth, so professional. In addition to the lovely Australian accent, like Nicole Kidman's when she wasn't covering it, Jeannie's voice had all the markers of higher education. He flipped through the three photos on his viewfinder's screen. The last one was funny: her mouth open, the anger obvious, and the camera reflected in the mirrored shades clearly illustrated the reason for her ire. He should blow it up and laminate it to the side of her chopper some night.

The head-on shot of her still and quiet a moment earlier was far better, though. It captured the serious pilot, the frank gaze of a professional, a very pretty professional, doing her job. Though that shot had the mood spoiled by the dual reflections of his camera.

It was the first shot that stopped him. That was an amazing photo. The same intentness, now in profile-she had an exceptionally pleasant profile-high forehead, nice nose, and womanly lips above a well-defined chin and a splendid length of neck. But the wide-angle lens had captured her hands on the controls of a vastly complex machine. Beyond the window, the wall of smoke and flame hung so close he could feel his nerves

starting to return.

He'd never been afraid of fire. Respected it? Immensely. But afraid? Not until he'd almost been burned to death for the second time in his life.

He lowered the camera and inspected where he had come to rest.

As a hotshot for seven years, he'd been delivered by helitack any number of times but he'd only gotten to ride up front a few times. Those trips had been in a much smaller and simpler chopper. The Firehawk was a monster. A dozen smoke eaters could cram in the cargo bay along with their gear. The controls up here in the front were arranged in a giant T. A long console between the seats offered a bewildering array of electronics. It was set up with three columns of gear, some of it radios, but a lot of which he didn't recognize.

Then the broad top of the T spread sideways just below the main windshield. It presented each seat with two large glass squares like laptop screens, with a half-dozen control buttons on each of the four sides. A quick glance showed that his two screens and Jeannie's two were each showing different information. Terrain map, radar with tiny blips that must be other aircraft, and the other two completely cluttered with images of dials and gauges that he couldn't begin to interpret.

Overhead, above the windscreen, was another bank of controls mounted in the ceiling with levers for two engines and a bunch of switches and circuit breakers. As far as he could tell, it would require a serious college course to even understand what half of the labels meant, never mind how to use them.

Taken all together, it meant only one thing to him: Way out of your league, Cal. He was good at two things: fighting fire and photographing the fight. Those were the only skills he'd ever found, and the only real pleasures. Jeannie was from a whole other level of the world that he didn't get to play in. He rarely even had the opportunity to watch it from the outside.

Between his knees, the cyclic control wiggled back and forth, mirroring Jeannie's smooth control movements with her right hand on her own stick. A lever between the left side of his seat and the door rose and fell slightly. A quick glance revealed that it too was matching her left hand's actions.

What he really liked was the view. In addition to his bubble window in the door and the broad windscreen above the console, the chopper also offered a wide view through a window that formed the lower front corners of the helicopter's nose down around his feet. The numerous windows offered an unprecedented view of the fire.

He stayed with the wide-angle lens, wanting to capture the feeling of the view from the safe bubble of the chopper. They bounced and twisted through the air currents, rising heat creating updrafts and microbursts that were keeping Jeannie busy.

Then with the long lens, he snapped the hotshots, tiny blots of yellow before a wall of smoke and fire that appeared to stretch on forever. When you were in it, tasting the fire, hawking and spitting to clear the ash from your tongue and cursing the loss of even that much moisture, all you saw was your part of the battle—a couple dozen yards, sometimes only a couple of dozen feet. Here, above it but still in it, the fire took on a different character. The battle looked hopeless, the tiny twenty-man hotshot team and the massive forest ablaze around them.

Yet that was how the battles were fought, up close and personal. And other than the smokejumpers, the hotshots were the ones closest to the front. Engine companies, dozer teams, and locals worked where their equipment could go. Where they couldn't go, the hotshots hiked in. And where the hotshots couldn't go, the

smokies jumped out of their airplanes and parachuted in. Above the ground teams flew helitankers and fixed-wing air tankers, raining water, water with foam, or retardant down from the heavens, depending on what the ground team needed and what was available.

Just past the hotshot crew he could see the lead chopper start its dump. Retardant. The dark red cascaded down like a heaven-born waterfall. Jeannie had said a thousand gallons, a couple of hot tubs worth all at once. Didn't sound like much when he thought of it that way. Though he knew from working previous fires that a thousand gallons had a huge impact on holding a line.

With his telephoto he watched the trees the lead pilot was hitting just outside the fire's flank, trapping it into a narrow band that could then be cut off with a firebreak. They'd steer the fire to its own destruction when it ran out of places to escape to and reignite.

The retardant would coat the unburned timber and block oxygen from the surface. No oxygen, no fire. They left a red stripe across the forest for hundreds of yards, clearly marking what had and hadn't been hit.

Jeannie swung to the east of the first retardant drop over the burning flank of the trees. He felt the motorized vents open, could feel the helicopter lighten, become more jittery in the heat-wracked winds.

"Hey, you can't see it." He tried looking out the side window, but the water and foam was, of course, pouring out directly behind them as they flew forward. Even the bulge in the window wasn't enough to see anything.

"You got it in one, mate," Jeannie answered him. "We dump blind." But she was making minor course corrections even as she flew.

"Then how?" He flapped a hand like a snake to indicate her course changes.

"Following inside the Major's line. Best pilot I've ever met, just unbelievably good, so whatever the Major does, I do. Always works out."

"The Major?"

"Ex-major, former Army. But when you meet her, there's no question. She's in total control." Jeannie flicked a switch on the handle of her cyclic control and he heard the drop doors shut beneath their feet.

She. He'd fallen in with the helitanker girls of Mount Hood Aviation. Cal had heard about them and dismissed the stories as exaggerated because they were told by men about firefighting women. Women were a rare breed in wildfire, so the grunts either gunned for them, placed them on impossible pedestals, or, more typically, did both.

This particular female pilot had done a damn neat bit of flying to save his behind. And she said that her teammate was unbelievably better. So maybe the pedestal was deserved in this case.

"Can't see when I drop, but I'm not above peeking." Having said that, Jeannie spun them around in a move so slick it left his head spinning. She continued to fly in the direction she'd been going, but now they faced backward so that they could see where she'd just flown.

Even as Cal reoriented himself to flying backward, he could see the results. The water, mixed with foaming agent, had expanded in volume by more than ten times to cover a broad area. Jeannie's load had dropped over a swath of crown fire, flames jumping from the top of one tree to the next.

How many times had he stood beneath a crown and raged as the fire passed him by, high overhead, totally

out of his reach to fight it? He could see the line where the foam had cooled the upper fires, knocking them back to earth, down to where the hotshots and other fire teams could fight them on the ground. He'd often appreciated it from the ground, but he'd never seen it from above.

"Sweet!"

"Thanks."

They shared a smile. Then she shifted the controls. In one smooth motion they went from flying backward to flying forward the way they were facing, headed once more for the swimming pool.

"Where did you learn to fly like this?" Cal had seen a lot of pilots, but Jeannie had a smoothness he hadn't seen before. "It's like you're wired into the gear. And the way you stayed stable in the currents off the ridge when you saved my sorry ass... You must have some kind of mystic communion with the world's winds."

Jeannie was grinning. "I'm a cyborg, wired straight into my sweet machine. Do you always run your mouth like a 'roo gone mad?"

"A 'roo?"

"A kangaroo."

"So you're from Australia?" Cal did his best to appear clueless.

"What, didn't my accent give me away?"

"Might have if I hadn't thought you were a Kiwi." Of course he'd recognized the Strine in her speech. It was like Scottish, always sounding so sexy to his American-trained ear. But that didn't mean he couldn't tease her about it a bit.

"A Kiwi?" Her voice rose enough to hurt his ears over the headset that blocked most of the rotor noise. "A Kiwi? I sound like a goddamn islander? Wherever you got your ear, you should demand a goddamn refund."

"I asked for one, but when I was on the Black Saturday bushfire, they weren't issuing Strine hearing aids to bloody Yank hotshots."

The chopper actually jinked sideways as Jeannie twisted to look at him. She recovered instantly, he was glad to see, and continued her descent toward the same swimming pool they'd used before.

She lowered and started the snorkel before speaking again. This time her voice was whisper soft.

"You fought Down Under on the Black Saturday fire?"

"Sure, didn't you?" He tried to make it funny.

She nodded, but didn't say anything.

And suddenly he was sorry he'd teased her. More than a million acres, four thousand homes and businesses, and 173 lives. The flames had moved at over sixty kilometers per hour across the land. Even cars weren't fast enough to escape the flames on some of the rutted back roads that the Australians called tracks.

Jeannie sucked another nine hundred gallons into the belly tank, while the furniture that hadn't been blown

aside before was slammed up against the fence. After that, they fell into a quiet routine as she flew.

On one of the trips, he had her call the hotshot ground crew. "They'll want to know about that tongue of fire to the west. They can't see it from the ground yet, but if they move fast, they can cut it off." And by the time they returned with the next load, the hotshots had done just that. It was a new perspective up here, one that they mostly enjoyed in silence.

They made three more trips before she needed to get more foaming agent and fuel. He kept taking photos, but nothing matched that first portrait of her. The image was burned into his brain. He'd take a picture of Beale's helicopter, for that was the ex-major's name, spilling retardant...and think about Jeannie's profile. He'd hear the tank doors opening for their own drop...and think about her smooth accent.

Cal Jackson never went soft on any woman, yet somehow she'd slipped past his guard in just their first hour of meeting. Hell, in the first ten minutes, if he was willing to admit the truth. Which he wasn't.

When they returned to the helispot to fuel up, he hopped off and left her to fly the next round alone. First, he'd been running with the hotshots for more than forty straight hours before he'd been trapped, and he was falling asleep in the seat now that the last of the adrenaline was gone.

Second, he needed a little more distance from Jeannie of the deep-red hair.

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