

*Montana Fire Book One*

**Where There's Smoke**

**By**

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## Prologue

She'd come three thousand miles to burn to death.

“Kate, if you don't deploy right now, you're going to die!”

Kate Burns could hear Jed, his voice muffling around in the back of her brain, but the roar of the fire simply had her by the throat. Three-hundred-foot flame lengths chewing up the pristine Alaskan wilderness, torching Fraser firs, white pines, black spruce. The blaze candled along the tops of the birch trees, the fire storm churning up its own wind.

It felt like that hand of God, reaching out to grab her in a paralyzing chokehold. It kept her brain from firing, from reacting to Jed's words.

From reaching for her shake-and-bake fire shelter, folded and tucked in the pocket of her jump pants.

Because, what would it matter? They were in the green, a highly combustible area, and they'd bake to death under the thin tinfoil even if the fire didn't scurry underneath and scorch them.

And that vivid picture had her knees buckling.

Her father would be so angry.

“Kate!”

Hands on her shoulders shook her, jerked her around. “Get your shelter on!”

Kate got a glimpse of Jed a second before he threw her to the ground. Face blackened, his eyes fierce, red bandanna pulled up over his nose. And balancing hard on a makeshift crutch she'd fashioned for him only hours before.

He looked like she felt—wrung out, broken, and on the edge of unraveling.

Except, he wasn't standing still, waiting for the wall of flame to hit him. In fact, he had his shelter out, already unfurled, and now shook it over her. She fell to the ground, an old, dry riverbed, filled with gravel and rock, moss and brush. But, where he pushed her down, mostly sand and dirt.

"Pin it down! Remember your training."

Training. Oh—the three years as a hotshot—a wildland firefighter—and her last six weeks with the Midnight Sun Smokejumpers where, two weeks ago, she'd passed her final exam.

*Don't die.* Her training boss said it as he'd handed her the Midnight Sun patch. Laughter. She'd grinned.

Jed landed in the dirt next to her, having apparently yanked her shelter from her pocket. He wrestled with it in the superheated winds, his teeth gritted as he yanked it down to the earth. Pinning it there with hands, elbows, knees, feet.

Except, in a flash that struck her in the heart, she knew the truth.

*She* might not die, but Jed Ransom didn't have a prayer of holding down all four corners, not to mention the edges, of his shelter. Not with his injured leg.

Not with those bare hands.

Kate threw off her shelter and, in a second, it caught the wind and flew—no turning back now.

"What are you doing!"

She didn't answer him as she rolled herself under his tinfoil, grabbing a corner, drawing it over her. She clamped down her side with her hand, elbow, and leg.

He caught on fast. Or maybe not as much as she'd hoped, because even as she nailed down the side with her limbs, he covered her upper body with his, protecting her.

She felt the length of his body against her, his powerful arms, honed from chopping through the dense forest, digging fire line with his fire ax, aka Pulaski. For a second, her heart just stopped with the sense of it. She'd spent the last decade wishing she might end up right here.

In Jed Ransom's arms.

Hopefully right before he kissed her.

Except, maybe she'd omit the part where they would bake.

Jed secured the top of the shelter with his hands, the other side with his elbow, knee, his good leg.

Then, her helmet crushed next to his, he said in his low baritone, "Dig us a hole to breathe into."

Outside, the fire cycloned around them, exploding through the trees into a storm of flame, the sound of it a locomotive ready to drive over them.

Kate started to shake as she clawed at the ground, scrubbing away pebbles and stone, finding the cool riverbed. She widened the hole for him, and his whiskers brushed her face as he fought to find cooler air.

"Deeper. We need to protect our faces." He balanced his helmet on the rim of the hole, his breath on her skin as he turned to her. "We're going to live, Kate, I promise."

She longed to believe him.

The 'shake and bake' flapped, the fury of the fire starting to bake them. Sweat dripped down her face, saturated her body under her jumpsuit and turnout jacket.

And then Jed's breathing caught. Tiny sounds, a deep groan as the heat began to sear his skin. But she couldn't lift her head, because suddenly the fire washed over them, a wave of heat and flame and fury that made her press her face to the earth.

She didn't know who screamed first.