

Sample chapter from The Heart's Flames
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Chapter

1

A Time to Burn

Miles and miles of burning desert stretched out below as the heat made waves in the dry Arizona air. Sweat and ash dripped from Cole's brow, a tangible mixture of anxiety and body warmth. Oppressive, searing heat bore down on every inch of his body, anxiety making his heart pump at twice the normal rate. He shifted his back against the seat, feeling a familiar weight, heavy, yet safe and comfortable. His hands trembled with adrenaline as he fastened the straps and tested with practiced precision the lines that would carry out their job, taking him safely to the flames. How many times had he been here before, waiting breathlessly for the command to jump? How many times had he been here, prepared to plummet towards the ground with only a sack of cloth and ropes to keep him alive, praying all the while that the wind wouldn't shift and the flames wouldn't consume? How many times had he kissed his sweet, sweet wife good-bye, promising another morning but unsure of that night's work? *Dear Lord, let me have just one more day.*

For seventy-nine hours the wildfires had already been blazing, devouring everything within their grasp like a raging animal delighting in the kill. There was no rain; no moisture of any kind. There hadn't been for weeks. The Arizona cacti were slumped and parched, the palm fronds brown on the trees, the perfect fuel for the fire.

Cole's tarnished wedding band caught a glint of broken sunlight, the sparkling fragment taking him back to this morning, back to his Julie and Emma.

His pager had gone off at four, waking him from a blissful slumber. Dawn's soft breath was far from their piece of sky; only a hazy grayness peeked in through the window, revealing splashes of stars winking down on them, bestowing a blessing from Heaven. Julie rolled over, her caramel hair tousled and her emerald eyes sinking low beneath eyelids heavy with sleep. "Don't. Don't answer it. Please." Her quiet pleading shot arrows through his heart, and a flicker of fear registered in his mind. They went through this every time he got a call. He loved his job, and she supported him because she understood it was something he had been called to do, something he thrived on, but her support just hadn't been the same since Emma had been born.

Two weeks ago, when warnings about potential fire breaking out flashed across the news screen, they had sat down and had a long talk about his obligations and responsibilities as a father and how incredibly dangerous his job was and what a threat it was to the family. They agreed that he would be extra careful about which calls he would take, but he gently reminded her that when Arizona was in a state of emergency and the wildfires broke out, he had to go. He needed to go. He wanted to go.

"If I don't go, who will, Julie? Who will go? How can I expect some other guy to risk his life to save my family if I

won't risk my own? You're everything to me, you and Emma. I know my limits, but I also know my responsibilities."

"And what about your responsibilities to me, to you daughter? Which responsibilities come first, Cole?"

"Oh, Jules, don't even play that card. You know the reason I go out there in the first place is you. My way of serving and taking care of my family is to fight. My grandfather fought in the war, my father fought in the courtroom, and I fight right out there, right outside where the biggest risk to my family lies. You see that, don't you? You know I am in this because I love you and I want to grow old with you, that I won't allow anything or anyone to keep me from you and Emma because you are my world. I breathe you like air, and I suffocate each time that pager sounds and I know we must be apart. But that suffocation is nothing like what it would be if I lost you and I could have done something to stop that."

"And I appreciate that; I really do. I have supported you from the beginning you know that. I supported you when my mother said you were nothing but bad news because you weren't affluent like my family, when your grandfather got sick right before our wedding and you needed me to stand by you, and when you said we were moving to take this job so that you could fight these stupid fires. I supported you through all of that, Cole, but, it's just, I mean, we talk all the time about giving Emma a little brother or sister and adding to our family, but I can't imagine taking care of any babies without you. How would I function, knowing...?" Sobs shook her petite frame as Cole pulled her into a tight hug.

Pressing his lips tight against her hair, he whispered into her ear, "Julie, I love you. Just think about that for a second. I would rope the moon, climb any mountain, swim any sea, and fight any fire to hold you forever, and that's exactly what I intend to do for the rest of both of our lives,

so stop worrying. I love you.” He tilted her head back and looked deep into her eyes. Softly wiping the tears away, he kissed her, slowly at first, then with mounting passion until they were both left breathless. A soft moan escaped her lips and she smiled.

“And I love you, Cole. With every passing day, every passing moment, I fall more in love with you than the last. It’s that love I have for you that makes me scared out of my mind that if something were to ever happen to you and I was to be left alone....”

“Baby, you’ll never be alone. I will always be here, and when you don’t see my face, you’ll hear my heart, beating in time with yours. God brought us together for a reason. We make each other stronger. We’re so good for each other. He won’t tear us apart. Not ever.”

“Never. We’ll just spend every moment on this earth and all of eternity hand in hand, Mr. Cole Hunter; you’re never getting rid of me!”

“Oh, never, is that right?”

The memory faded into the background as the rest of his team readied their chutes. He had to stay focused. The kiss they had shared this morning on the front porch just before he left lingered in his mind, and he knew she was with him now, here in this place. He held onto that as he prepared to fall.

“All right, boys,” smoke-jumping captain Jeff Meyers called out, “Holmes, Hunter, Dreggs, you’ll all be jumping on three. You boys know the drill.” Anticipation fluttered through Cole’s stomach as a gust of wind knocked everyone backwards as the drop hatch opened and the cabin pressure changed. “Watch each other now, boys, and don’t let her surround ya, y’hear? All right, now, 1-2-3, go, go, go! And God be with ya,” he murmured. “Doug, dump again. Give our boys a clearing to work with.”

The three disappeared into the haze as the plane began an awkward tilt. "Doug, buddy, what are ya doing?" called out Meyers. "Doug?"

As Jeff rounded the corner to see what the pilot was up to, and concerned that the hatch for the red flame retardant wasn't opening yet, Jeff noticed a strange sweat covering Doug's body and a pallor uncharacteristic of Italian-blooded Doug Cazolli.

"Boss, hey, boss..." Doug's breath was coming in ragged gasps and his left hand was furiously pumping, open, shut, open, shut as his eyes rolled back in his head. "I can't breathe real good, boss. Boss," gasped Doug, "you've got to land this thing for the both of us." Doug's arms slumped over the control shifts as Jeff tried desperately to pull Doug's robust body out of the pilot seat. He had to get that hatch open and the retardant out or those boys would burn. He needed help. Desperately he prayed a prayer of protection over himself and his boys as he flipped the switch for the chemicals to fall. The plane was heading down fast now, and the man in front of him was obviously not breathing. In a split second decision, Jeff Meyers pulled in a final attempt at the controls and began giving mouth to mouth to his fallen comrade. They were going to crash, no doubt about it. Jeff didn't know how to fly, he hadn't in years, and even if he could get the plane under control, there was nowhere to land for miles. They were going to die and he knew it. He continued breathing life into his friend as his heart exploded in panic in his own chest. *Dear Jesus, I am so sorry. What have I done?*

The plane fell faster and faster now, nose-diving in an aerial show sure to stop spectators' hearts. The speed increased and the rear hatch suddenly flew open with such force that Jeff was knocked down the aisle from Doug and his breath was taken away by the ashy, hot air rushing in.

His ears popped wildly and his heart fluttered in his chest as the body of his only pilot rolled down the plane . The end was nearing now, Jeff could feel it. They say you see your whole life flash before your eyes right before you die, and at that moment Jeff was thinking of his wedding some thirty years ago to Maureen, his beautiful young bride. He saw her walking steadily down the aisle, eyes tearing up. He saw his eldest son, Adam, going off for his first day of school, and then on to college. And then there was Gregory, the rebel. He thought of all the petty fights they had had over the years, and all the hugs that had mended bruised egos. He saw his baby girl, Lily Ann, on the day of her christening, all dressed in white, shimmering like the angel she was. He saw Lily, belly swollen with twins, and remembered the pride bursting in his heart when he held those little girls for the very first time.

It was seconds to impact; Jeff knew it in his bones. *Dear Jesus, I pray you welcome me with open arms. Protect my family, Lord.* He cried now, for the first time in years. *Oh God, don't let them feel any anguish and let them know I am watching over them always.* He felt like he couldn't breathe, like he had forgotten how, like he hadn't been breathing for years. Maybe he was having a heart attack of his own. But no, it was the searing heat of the air rushing all around him that was singeing his lungs. *Oh Jesus, let there be no pain.*

The nose of the plane hit hard. Grinding and twisting metal deafened Jeff and he closed his eyes as he waited to see his Jesus. He could feel the intense heat, smell the burning plane. Suddenly the plane hit a tree and ground to an abrupt halt. It hit so hard that the front nose was ripped open and the plane tipped radically to one side. A moment went by, then another. Jeff took in the fact that he was still alive. A searing pain in his right leg let him know he had broken some bones, and the blood running down into

his eyes kept him in check; but he was alive, and he needed out. Scurrying as quickly as possible towards the incline, Jeff searched for something to break a window, something, and anything that would help him escape before he burned to death inside his plane. Ripping at a bench leg with all his might, Jeff let out a strangled scream. Oh, the intense pain in every muscle; every inch of his body felt like it was on fire. Again he pulled, harder still. Suddenly the bolts gave way and Jeff fell backwards, the momentum carrying him careening back into the opposite bench. He landed with a thud as his femur went through the uppermost layers of skin, and he cried out as he reached for the window.

The pain and adrenaline were becoming unbearable, and his head was spinning. He retched several times. He tried with all his energy to stay conscious. As he neared the window, the flames suddenly burst through the front of the plane. Jeff knew he didn't have much time. The burning countryside all around him would surely devour his plane and his body if he didn't act fast.

Just as he stooped to use the remaining ounces of strength he had left to shove the bench leg through the window, he saw movement. Could it be? It looked like people out there. Were those his boys? Could they really have come? Elation overcame exhaustion and Jeff reared the bar back with all his strength. He had to get out right now. His boys could help him if only he could let them know where he was.

Outside, Cole, Michael Holmes, and Jacob Dreggs ran with their packs, panting towards the fiery scraps of plane. "Do you think anyone's alive in there?" puffed Holmes. "Do you think they are in there, Hunter?"

Cole's heart beat hard in his chest as he thought of losing his captain and friend. He had no idea why the plane was on the ground and not safely up in the air, but he was going to do whatever it took to get his captain out alive. "We're

going to find out, boys. Okay, secure the perimeter of the plane and I'll go see what kind of entrances we have to work with." Cole could already see that flames were engulfing the nose of the plane and that it was split in two. The rear hatch was opened and the flaps were gone, lost somewhere back at the point of impact, and the right wing was buried deep in the dirt, causing the plane to have a steep slant.

Through the smoke and flames, Cole could see his partners securing the area, giving them a more generous time frame to work with. Suddenly, a movement within the plane caught his eye. He moved closer, sensing that someone was still alive in there. Then their eyes locked: It was Jeff, and he was vainly trying to break a window with some sort of metal bar. Cole took no time to think and immediately ran for that window. His friend was within reach. *Dear Lord, let me get to him in time.* Then it happened: the ripping, popping sound of the fuel tanks exploding.

Cole froze in horror as he watched Jeff Meyers, a man who was like a second father to him, as well as his mentor and friend, be blasted apart within the flames. Fire shot out and up several hundred feet, and Cole felt his body leave the ground. The force of the heated explosion was sure to claim his life, and he thought of his wife and baby girl. And as the flames spewed higher, everything went black, and silence was all he heard.

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