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**Opening Extract from...**

# Chasing Fire

Written by Nora Roberts

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# Nora Roberts

# Chasing Fire

PIATKUS

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*To Bruce*

*For understanding me,*

*and loving me anyway*

# INITIAL ATTACK

**Soon kindled and soon burnt.**

William Shakespeare

# 1

Caught in the crosshairs of wind above the Bitterroots, the jump ship fought to find its stream. Fire boiling over the land jabbed its fists up through towers of smoke as if trying for a knockout punch.

From her seat Rowan Tripp angled to watch a seriously pissed-off Mother Nature's big show. In minutes she'd be inside it, enclosed in the mad world of searing heat, leaping flames, choking smoke. She'd wage war with shovel and saw, grit and guile. A war she didn't intend to lose.

Her stomach bounced along with the plane, a sensation she'd taught herself to ignore. She'd flown all of her life, and had fought wildfires every season since her eighteenth birthday. For the last half of those eight years she'd jumped fire.

She'd studied, trained, bled and burned—outwilled pain and exhaustion to become a Zulie. A Missoula smoke jumper.

She stretched out her long legs as best she could for a moment, rolled her shoulders under her pack to keep them loose.

Beside her, her jump partner watched as she did. His fingers did a fast tap dance on his thighs. "She looks mean."

"We're meaner."

He shot her a fast, toothy grin. "Bet your ass."

Nerves. She could all but feel them riding along his skin.

Near the end of his first season, Rowan thought, and Jim Brayner needed to pump himself up before a jump. Some always would, she decided, while others caught short catnaps to bank sleep against the heavy withdrawals to come.

She was first jump on this load, and Jim would be right behind her. If he needed a little juice, she'd supply it.

"Kick her ass, more like. It's the first real bitch we've jumped in a week." She gave him an easy elbow jab. "Weren't you the one who kept saying the season was done?"

He tapped those busy fingers on his thighs to some inner rhythm. "Nah, that was Matt," he insisted, grin still wide as he deflected the claim onto his brother.

"That's what you get with a couple Nebraska farm boys. Don't you have a hot date tomorrow night?"

"My dates are always hot."

She couldn't argue, as she'd seen Jim snag women like rainbow trout anytime the unit had pulled a night off to kick it up in town. He'd hit on her, she remembered, about two short seconds after he'd arrived on base. Still, he'd been good-natured about her shutdown. She'd implemented a firm policy against dating within the unit.

Otherwise, she might've been tempted. He had that open, innocent face offset by the quick grin, and the gleam in the eye. For fun, she thought, for a careless pop of the cork out of the lust bottle. For serious—even if she'd been looking for serious—he'd never do the trick. Though they were the same age, he was just too young, too fresh off the farm—and maybe just a little too sweet under the thin layer of green that hadn't burned off quite yet.

"Which girl's going to bed sad and lonely if you're still dancing with the dragon?" she asked him.

"Lucille."

"That's the little one—with the giggle."

His fingers tapped, tapped, tapped on his knee. "She does more than giggle."

"You're a dog, Romeo."

He tipped back his head, let out a series of sharp barks that made her laugh.

"Make sure Dolly doesn't find out you're out howling," she commented. She knew—everyone knew—he'd been banging one of the base cooks like a drum all season.

"I can handle Dolly." The tapping picked up pace. "Gonna handle Dolly."

Okay, Rowan thought, something bent out of shape there, which was why smart people didn't bang or get banged by people they worked with.

She gave him a little nudge because those busy fingers concerned her. "Everything okay with you, farm boy?"

His pale blue eyes met hers for an instant, then shifted away while his knees did a bounce under those drumming fingers. "No problems here. It's going to be smooth sailing like always. I just need to get down there."

She put a hand over his to still it. "You need to keep your head in the game, Jim."

"It's there. Right there. Look at her, swishing her tail," he said. "Once us Zulies get down there, she won't be so sassy. We'll put her down, and I'll be making time with Lucille tomorrow night."

Unlikely, Rowan thought to herself. Her aerial view of the fire put her gauge at a solid two days of hard, sweaty work.

And that was if things went their way.

Rowan reached for her helmet, nodded toward their spotter. "Getting ready. Stay chilly, farm boy."

"I'm ice."

Cards—so dubbed as he carried a pack everywhere—wound his way through the load of ten jumpers and equipment to the rear of the plane, attached the tail of his harness to the restraining line.

Even as Cards shouted out the warning to guard their reserves, Rowan hooked her arm over hers. Cards, a tough-bodied vet, pulled the door open to a rush of wind tainted with smoke and fuel. As he reached for the first set of streamers, Rowan set her helmet over her short crown of blond hair, strapped it, adjusted her face mask.

She watched the streamers doing their colorful dance against the smoke-stained sky. Their long strips kicked in the turbulence, spiraled toward the southwest, seemed to roll, to rise, then caught another bounce before whisking into the trees.

Cards called, "Right!" into his headset, and the pilot turned the plane.

The second set of streamers snapped out, spun like a kid's wind-up toy. The strips wrapped together, pulled apart, then dropped onto the tree-flanked patch of the jump site.

"The wind line's running across that creek, down to the trees and across the site," Rowan said to Jim.

Over her, the spotter and pilot made more adjustments, and another set of streamers snapped out into the slipstream.

"It's got a bite to it."

"Yeah. I saw." Jim swiped the back of his hand over his mouth before strapping on his helmet and mask.

"Take her to three thousand," Cards shouted.

Jump altitude. As first man, first stick, Rowan rose to take position. "About three hundred yards of drift," she shouted to Jim, repeating what she'd heard Cards telling the pilot. "But there's that bite. Don't get caught downwind."

"Not my first party."

She saw his grin behind the bars of his face mask—confident, even eager. But something in his eyes, she thought. Just for a flash. She started

to speak again, but Cards, already in position to the right of the door, called out, "Are you ready?"

"We're ready," she called back.

"Hook up."

Rowan snapped the static line in place.

"Get in the door!"

She dropped to sitting, legs out in the wicked slipstream, body leaning back. Everything roared. Below her extended legs, fire ran in vibrant red and gold.

There was nothing but the moment, nothing but the wind and fire and the twist of exhilaration and fear that always, always surprised her.

"Did you see the streamers?"

"Yeah."

"You see the spot?"

She nodded, bringing both into her head, following those colorful strips to the target.

Cards repeated what she'd told Jim, almost word for word. She only nodded again, eyes on the horizon, letting her breath come easy, visualizing herself flying, falling, navigating the sky down to the heart of the jump spot.

She went through her four-point check as the plane completed its circle and leveled out.

Cards pulled his head back in. "Get ready."

*Ready-steady*, her father said in her head. She grabbed both sides of the door, sucked in a breath.

And when the spotter's hand slapped her shoulder, she launched herself into the sky.

Nothing she knew topped that one instant of insanity, hurling herself into the void. She counted off in her mind, a task as automatic as breathing, and rolled in that charged sky to watch the plane fly past. She caught sight of Jim, hurtling after her.

Again, she turned her body, fighting the drag of wind until her feet

were down. With a yank and jerk, her canopy burst open. She scouted out Jim again, felt a tiny pop of relief when she saw his chute spread against the empty sky. In that pocket of eerie silence, beyond the roar of the plane, above the voice of the fire, she gripped her steering toggles.

The wind wanted to drag her north, and was pretty insistent about it. Rowan was just as insistent on staying on the course she'd mapped out in her head. She watched the ground as she steered against the frisky crosscurrent that pinched its fingers on her canopy, doing its best to circle her into the tailwind.

The turbulence that had caught the streamers struck her in gusty slaps while the heat pumped up from the burning ground. If the wind had its way, she'd overshoot the jump spot, fly into the verge of trees, risk a hang-up. Or worse, it could shove her west, and into the flames.

She dragged hard on her toggle, glanced over in time to see Jim catch the downwind and go into a spin.

"Pull right! Pull right!"

"I got it! I got it."

But to her horror, he pulled left.

"Right, goddamn it!"

She had to turn for her final, and the pleasure of a near seamless slide into the glide path drowned in sheer panic. Jim soared west, helplessly towed by a horizontal canopy.

Rowan hit the jump site, rolled. She gained her feet, slapped her release. And heard it as she stood in the center of the blaze.

She heard her jump partner's scream.

**The scream** followed her as she shot up in bed, echoed in her head as she sat huddled in the dark.

*Stop, stop, stop!* she ordered herself. And dropped her head on her updrawn knees until she got her breath back.

No point in it, she thought. No point in reliving it, in going over all

the details, all the moments, or asking herself, again, if she could've done just one thing differently.

Asking herself why Jim hadn't followed her drop into the jump spot. Why he'd pulled the wrong toggle. Because, *goddamn it,* he'd pulled the wrong toggle.

And had flown straight into the towers and lethal branches of those burning trees.

Months ago now, she reminded herself. She'd had the long winter to get past it. And thought she had.

Being back on base triggered it, she admitted, and rubbed her hands over her face, back over the hair she'd had cut into a short, maintenance-free cap only days before.

Fire season was nearly on them. Refresher training started in a couple short hours. Memories, regrets, grief—they were bound to pay a return visit. But she needed sleep, another hour before she got up, geared up for the punishing three-mile run.

She was damn good at willing herself to sleep, anyplace, anytime. Coyote-ing in a safe zone during a fire, on a shuddering jump plane. She knew how to eat and sleep when the need and opportunity opened.

But when she closed her eyes again, she saw herself back on the plane, turning toward Jim's grin.

Knowing she had to shake it off, she shoved out of bed. She'd grab a shower, some caffeine, stuff in some carbs, then do a light workout to warm up for the physical training test.

It continued to baffle her fellow jumpers that she never drank coffee unless it was her only choice. She liked the cold and sweet. After she'd dressed, Rowan hit her stash of Cokes, grabbed an energy bar. She took both outside where the sky was still shy of first light and the air stayed chill in the early spring of western Montana.

In the vast sky stars blinked out, little candles snuffed. She pulled the dark and quiet around her, found some comfort in it. In an hour, give or take, the base would wake, and testosterone would flood the air.

Since she generally preferred the company of men, for conversation, for companionship, she didn't mind being outnumbered by them. But she prized her quiet time, those little pieces of alone that became rare and precious during the season. Next best thing to sleep before a day filled with pressure and stress, she thought.

She could tell herself not to worry about the run, remind herself she'd been vigilant about her PT all winter, was in the best shape of her life—and it didn't mean a damn.

Anything could happen. A turned ankle, a mental lapse, a sudden, debilitating cramp. Or she could just have a bad run. Others had. Sometimes they came back from it, sometimes they didn't.

And a negative attitude wasn't going to help. She chowed down on the energy bar, gulped caffeine into her system and watched the day eke its first shimmer over the rugged, snow-tipped western peaks.

When she ducked into the gym minutes later, she noted her alone time was over.

"Hey, Trigger." She nodded to the man doing crunches on a mat. "What do you know?"

"I know we're all crazy. What the hell am I doing here, Ro? I'm forty-fucking-three years old."

She unrolled a mat, started her stretches. "If you weren't crazy, weren't here, you'd still be forty-fucking-three."

At six-five, barely making the height restrictions, Trigger Gulch was a lean, mean machine with a west Texas twang and an affection for cowboy boots.

He huffed through a quick series of pulsing crunches. "I could be lying on a beach in Waikiki."

"You could be selling real estate in Amarillo."

"I could do that." He mopped his face, pointed at her. "Nine-to-five the next fifteen years, then retire to that beach in Waikiki."

"Waikiki's full of people, I hear."

"Yeah, that's the damn trouble." He sat up, a good-looking man with gray liberally salted through his brown hair, and a scar snaked on his left knee from a meniscus repair. He smiled at her as she lay on her back, pulled her right leg up and toward her nose. "Looking good, Ro. How was your fat season?"

"Busy." She repeated the stretch on her left leg. "I've been looking forward to coming back, getting me some rest."

He laughed at that. "How's your dad?"

"Good as gold." Rowan sat up, then folded her long, curvy body in two. "Gets a little wistful this time of year." She closed ice-blue eyes and pulled her flexed feet back toward the crown of her head. "He misses the start-up, everybody coming back, but the business doesn't give him time to brood."

"Even people who aren't us like to jump out of planes."

"Pay good money for it, too. Had a good one last week." She spread her legs in a wide vee, grabbed her toes and again bent forward. "Couple celebrated their fiftieth anniversary with a jump. Gave me a bottle of French champagne as a tip."

Trigger sat where he was, watching as she pushed to her feet to begin the first sun salutation. "Are you still teaching that hippie class?"

Rowan flowed from Up Dog to Down Dog, turned her head to shoot Trigger a pitying look. "It's yoga, old man, and yeah, I'm still doing some personal trainer work off-season. Helps keep the lard out of my ass. How about you?"

"I pile the lard on. It gives me more to burn off when the real work starts."

"If this season's as slow as last, we'll all be sitting on fat asses. Have you seen Cards? He doesn't appear to have turned down any second helpings this winter."

"Got a new woman."

"No shit." Looser, she picked up the pace, added lunges.

"He met her in the frozen food section of the grocery store in October, and moved in with her for New Year's. She's got a couple kids. Schoolteacher."

"Schoolteacher, kids? Cards?" Rowan shook her head. "Must be love."

"Must be something. He said the woman and the kids are coming out maybe late July, maybe spend the rest of the summer."

"That sounds serious." She shifted to a twist, eyeing Trigger as she held the position. "She must be something. Still, he'd better see how she handles a season. It's one thing to hook up with a smoke jumper in the winter, and another to stick through the summer. Families crack like eggs," she added, then wished she hadn't as Matt Brayner stepped in.

She hadn't seen him since Jim's funeral, and though she'd spoken with his mother a few times, hadn't been sure he'd come back.

He looked older, she thought, more worn around the eyes and mouth. And heartbreakingly like his brother with the floppy mop of bleached wheat hair, the pale blue eyes. His gaze tracked from Trigger, met hers. She wondered what the smile cost him.

"How's it going?"

"Pretty good." She straightened, wiped her palms on the thighs of her workout pants. "Just sweating off some nerves before the PT test."

"I thought I'd do the same. Or just screw it and go into town and order a double stack of pancakes."

"We'll get 'em after the run." Trigger walked over, held out a hand. "Good to see you, Hayseed."

"You too."

"I'm going for coffee. They'll be loading us up before too long."

As Trigger went out, Matt walked over, picked up a twenty-pound weight. Put it down again. "I guess it's going to be weird, for a while anyway. Seeing me makes everybody . . . think."

"Nobody's going to forget. I'm glad you're back."

"I don't know if I am, but I couldn't seem to do anything else. Any-

way. I wanted to say thanks for keeping in touch with my ma the way you have. It means a lot to her."

"I wish . . . Well, if wishes were horses I'd have a rodeo. I'm glad you're back. See you at the van."

**She understood** Matt's sentiment, couldn't seem to do anything else. It would sum up the core feelings of the men, and four women including herself, who piled into vans for the ride out to the start of the run for their jobs. She settled in, letting the ragging and bragging flow over her.

A lot of insults about winter weight, and the ever-popular lard-ass remarks. She closed her eyes, tried to let herself drift as the nerves riding under the good-natured bullshit winging around the van wanted to reach inside and shake hands with her own.

Janis Petrie, one of the four females in the unit, dropped down beside her. Her small, compact build had earned her the nickname Elf, and she looked like a perky head cheerleader.

This morning, her nails sported bright pink polish and her shiny brown hair bounced in a tail tied with a circle of butterflies.

She was pretty as a gumdrop, tended to giggle, and could—and did—work a saw line for fourteen hours straight.

"Ready to rock, Swede?"

"And roll. Why would you put on makeup before this bitch of a test?"

Janis fluttered her long, lush lashes. "So these poor guys'll have something pretty to look at when they stumble over the finish line. Seeing as I'll be there first."

"You are pretty damn fast."

"Small but mighty. Did you check out the rookies?"

"Not yet."

"Six of our kind in there. Maybe we'll add enough women for a nice little sewing circle. Or a book club."

Rowan laughed. "And after, we'll have a bake sale."

"Cupcakes. Cupcakes are my weakness. It's such pretty country." Janis leaned forward a little to get a clearer view out the window. "I always miss it when I'm gone, always wonder what I'm doing living in the city doing physical therapy on country club types with tennis elbow."

She blew out a breath. "Then by July I'll be wondering what I'm doing out here, strung out on no sleep, hurting everywhere, when I could be taking my lunch break at the pool."

"It's a long way from Missoula to San Diego."

"Damn right. You don't have that pull-tug. You live here. For most of us, this is coming home. Until we finish the season and go home, then that feels like home. It can cross up the circuits."

She rolled her warm brown eyes toward Rowan as the van stopped. "Here we go again."

Rowan climbed out of the van, drew in the air. It smelled good, fresh and new. Spring, the kind with green and wildflowers and balmy breezes, wouldn't be far off now. She scouted the flags marking the course as the base manager, Michael Little Bear, laid out requirements.

His long black braid streamed down his bright red jacket. Rowan knew there'd be a roll of Life Savers in the pocket, a substitute for the Marlboros he'd quit over the winter.

L.B. and his family lived a stone's throw from the base, and his wife worked for Rowan's father.

Everyone knew the rules. Run the course, and get it done in under 22:30, or walk away. Try it again in a week. Fail that? Find a new summer job.

Rowan stretched out—hamstrings, quads, calves.

"I hate this shit."

"You'll make it." She gave him an elbow in the belly. "Think of a meat-lover's pizza waiting for you on the other side of the line."

"Kiss my ass."

"The size it is now? That'd take me a while."

He snorted out a laugh as they lined up.

She calmed herself. Got in her head, got in her body, as L.B. walked back to the van. When the van took off, so did the line. Rowan hit the timer button on her watch, merged with the pack. She knew every one of them—had worked with them, sweated with them, risked her life with them. And she wished them—every one—good luck and a good run.

But for the next twenty-two and thirty, it was every man—and woman—for himself.

She dug in, kicked up her pace and ran for, what was in a very large sense, her life. She made her way through the pack and, as others did, called out encouragement or jibes, whatever worked best to kick asses into gear. She knew there would be knees aching, chests hammering, stomachs churning. Spring training would have toned some, added insult to injuries on others.

She couldn't think about it. She focused on mile one, and when she passed the marker, noted her time at 4:12.

Mile two, she ordered herself, and kept her stride smooth, her pace steady—even when Janis passed her with a grim smile. The burn rose up from her toes to her ankles, flowed up her calves. Sweat ran hot down her back, down her chest, over her galloping heart.

She could slow her pace—her time was good—but the stress of imagined stumbles, turned ankles, a lightning strike from beyond, pushed her.

Don't let up.

When she passed mile two she'd moved beyond the burn, the sweat, into the mindless. One more mile. She passed some, was passed by others, while her pulse pounded in her ears. As before a jump, she kept her eyes on the horizon—land and sky. Her love of both whipped her through the final mile.

She blew past the last marker, heard L.B. call out her name and time. *Tripp, fifteen-twenty.* And ran another twenty yards before she could convince her legs it was okay to stop.

Bending from the waist, she caught her breath, squeezed her eyes tightly shut. As always after the PT test she wanted to weep. Not from the effort. She—all of them—faced worse, harder, tougher. But the stress clawing at her mind finally retracted.

She could continue to be what she wanted to be.

She walked off the run, tuning in now as other names and times were called out. She high-fived with Trigger as he crossed three miles.

Everyone who passed stayed on the line. A unit again, all but willing the rest to make it, make that time. She checked her watch, saw the deadline coming up, and four had yet to cross.

Cards, Matt, Yangtree, who'd celebrated—or mourned—his fifty-fourth birthday the month before, and Gibbons, whose bad knee had him nearly hobbling those last yards.

Cards wheezed in with three seconds to spare, with Yangtree right behind him. Gibbons's face was a sweat-drenched study in pain and grit, but Matt? It seemed to Rowan he barely pushed.

His eyes met hers. She pumped her fist, imagined herself dragging him and Gibbons over the last few feet while the seconds counted down. She swore she could see the light come on, could see Matt reaching in, digging down.

He hit at 22:28, with Gibbons stumbling over a half second behind.

The cheer rose then, the triumph of one more season.

"Guess you two wanted to add a little suspense." L.B. lowered his clipboard. "Welcome back. Take a minute to bask, then let's get loaded."

"Hey, Ro!" She glanced over at Cards's shout, in time to see him turn, bend over and drop his pants. "Pucker up!"

And we're back, she thought.