

FICTION BY GWEN FLORIO



ON FIRE

Even without the radio, Jack would have known. He could smell it, taste it, an acrid tang on the tongue. The air grew heavy, took on a yellow tinge. Outlines blurred. He went home and waited for the phone to ring.

“It’s in the Beartooths, down along the Wyoming border,” the crew chief told him. “They’re setting up the camp outside Red Lodge. I’m driving the bus down. Pick you up?”

“You go on,” Jack said. “I’ll drive myself over. Got some business in Red Lodge I want to take care of after we’re done.”

He thought of her voice, the last time he’d worked out an excuse to call her. “No,” she’d said, her voice low and clear through the line. “Not now.”

“Hey, Earl.” Jack took a breath, risked the question. “Hotshots coming in?”

“The way this thing took off? You bet. They called in Bitterroot, Chief Mountain, Lolo, too,” Earl said, ticking off the names of the hotshot crews that fought the fire at its heart while hand crews like his worked the edges.

Lolo, too. Jack let his breath out. Hung up the phone. Forced himself to walk to his truck. Then gunned it to the interstate, picking up speed as he left Billings behind, new housing developments named for old ranches blurring past. Sixty miles to the southwest, the Beartooths defined the horizon, peaks wreathed like volcanoes.

Soon, Jack told himself. Soon.

He’d met her on a lightning start to the east, where Montana flattens out and slides into North Dakota. The fire wan-

dered with the wind through grazing land, forcing ranchers to waste a lot of time shifting sheep and cattle around but otherwise causing little damage. Earl's crew and a couple of other hand crews came up, digging line to turn it back from the occasional house or outbuilding, finishing up in plenty of time each day to make last call in town. But then the wind tacked hard to the north and the fire charged up into the Breaks, picking up speed as it swooped through the draws. There, it had a field day in the tinderbox of ponderosa pine, its roar drowning out the rattle of the hastily summoned slurry bombers as they circled once, then again, before releasing their livid plumes.

It was five nights before the crew saw town again, and Earl had to punch Jack awake when the bus jolted into the bar's gravel parking lot. But after Earl stood him a schnapps and an MGD, and then another, Jack felt life burning back into his wooden, deadweight limbs. He looked around. Ranchers ending their week in town crowded three deep at the bar, wafting a mix of Saturday night cologne and cow shit. Earl was already talking to a girl with dark, watchful eyes in a strong-jawed face and long, wavy hair pulled back from it. Across the room, he recognized the Chief Mountain Hotshots, Blackfeet from up by the Canadian border, still in their yellow Nomex shirts. They sat at a table they'd moved away from the others, and as Jack watched, one of them rose and shouldered his way to the bar, grabbing the girl with Earl. He wrapped both arms around her, nearly pulling her from the stool. Jack felt things slow down, everybody setting aside their beers and getting ready. The Indians were on their feet. Jack reached for the man, intending to get him off the girl, but Earl stepped between them.

"It's okay," he said, and then, seeing the others closing in, raised his voice. "It's okay. That's Leonard Old Horse and this here is Annie Brach. She's with Lolo Hotshots. They were at Two Medicine." The room had gone quiet, but

a murmur sizzled through it at the words.

Even the ranchers knew about the Two Medicine fire. Three hotshot crews went in to fight it and nobody pulled them out of a box canyon when the winds started. The fire blew up fast, taking ten firefighters, two of them women, with it. Until Two Medicine, it had never occurred to Jack that girls could be hotshots.

Leonard finally released Annie, and she smiled and caught her breath, holding out her hand to Jack when Earl pulled him into the circle they made. He tensed his hand against her grip and looked again at her arms, fire-tanned and corded.

Earl was still trying to settle everybody down. “You know how we talk about being ‘on fire’ when we’re out on the line,” he said. “Well, Leonard, here, he was really on fire at Two Medicine. He must’ve still been half-froze from one of those Hi-Line winters because he walked right up to that fire, they say, maybe trying to thaw out, and the fire obliged him, ran right over him. They brought him back into camp smelling like so much barbecue, and he was smiling. Smiling!”

“You got that right,” said Leonard. “It was the first time I’d been warm all year. You know what they say about the weather up on the Hi-Line. Just one month of summer, and that month comes one day at a time.” Only the right side of his mouth moved when he talked. The left trailed down into a sheet of scar tissue that stretched pink and tender against his brown, pockmarked skin.

“You were smiling because your nerve endings were burnt.” Annie’s voice, still hoarse with smoke, cut through the laughter. “It only happens with third-degree burns. That’s why there’s no pain. At first. You felt plenty later, if I remember.”

“Ignore her,” said Leonard. “She’s a fire geek. If she’s not on fire, she’s on her computer, trying to figure out where the next one will be, e-mailing those poor people at the Fire Center in Boise three times a day, telling them where to send Lolo.”

“Called this one right, didn’t I?” she said, and Leonard lifted a longneck in acknowledgment. Jack hung back, wondering how to get in on the conversation. A fire geek, Leonard had said. Jack touched her arm.

“What was Two Medicine like?” he asked. He thought maybe there’d be some tears trembling at the memory; with a girl, you didn’t know. But she spoke of perimeters and sequencing and wind speed, and he waved his arm, calling for more shots as her eyes grew glittery and her cheeks flamed red. He bent his head close to catch her analysis of downslope spreads and fire line overruns, and risked a hand on hers. She put her mouth to his ear. She’d loosened her hair and it fell about his face, its silkiness smelling of cinders and ash.

“Let’s go,” she said and cut her eyes toward the door.

Outside, they fell up against the rough log wall, his hands under her shirt, her breasts a soft surprise after the hardness of her arms and back.

“Not here,” she said, and so he took her to the bus, the two of them falling across a seat, him on his back, her tugging his pants down, the vinyl cold and slick beneath his bare legs. She sat up to strip her shirt over her head. In the dark, her nipples were sooty smudges. When he kissed them, he tasted smoke.

A light flashed across her face as the door of the bar opened, letting out a blast of noise and a knot of ranchers. They hooted and whistled.

“You see that?” someone said.

“Indeed I did. One of them fire boys. They like it hot, you know.”

“Local girl?”

“Naw.”

“Hell. I thought maybe your wife got lucky.”

They goosed their engines as they drove past the bus, spraying it with grit.

“That’ll be last call,” Annie said. “They’ll all be out soon.” She felt around for her shirt.

“We could go to a motel,” he said, hating the pleading in his voice.

“Can’t,” she said. “Smokejumpers took all the rooms. Besides, your bus is heading back to Billings when this place closes tonight. Earl told me.”

“The crew gets over your way sometimes,” he said. “I could call you.”

She shook her head. “You’d come up and I’d be on fire someplace else.”

He held out his hand to her as they climbed down from the bus. She ignored it.

“I got to see you again,” he said.

She backed away, stepping into the blaze of light from the bar.

“Maybe,” she said, “I’ll see you at the next fire.”

The bus was waiting when he got to Red Lodge, Earl hanging out the door, waving him over. They traveled a logging road, following the fire’s tracks through a no-color landscape still smoldering in spots, climbing past the burn to a high meadow. Jack and the others spread out, digging through brittle, matted grasses into soil so dry it puffed head-high with each blow, finding the creases in their clothing and skin. Jack wet his bandana and tied it across his face. To the west, a mountainside spat flame.

“That’s where it’s real bad,” Earl said. “Hotshots are trying to get a handle on it.”

So she was there. Jack swung his Pulaski, sidestepped, swung, sidestepped, moving down the line, finding his rhythm. He tried to keep his mind blank, but he finally let himself think how it might go, Annie sprawled beside him, sweat slicking her skin, hair plastered damp across her forehead. He swung the Pulaski wide and almost took the toe off

Earl's boot.

"Christ," said Earl. "What's wrong with you?"

Jack dropped the Pulaski and crouched beside it.

"Never mind," Earl said. "They're taking us back to camp, anyway. They've got things pretty much under control, this part of it, at least."

Jack went straight to the radio tent when he got back and saw Leonard Old Horse there ahead of him, the pale swath of his scar smeared dark with smoke and sweat. He told Jack what he knew.

"This time, they paid attention to the wind," he said and both of them were silent a moment, thinking of Two Medicine. "When the wind kicked up, they sent helicopters in. Chief Mountain was by a flat place, and they got us all out. But Lolo was up higher on the hill. All twenty of them are still up there, spread out all over creation, checking in when they can."

The radio crackled. "Not any more they're not," the operator said. "We lost contact with them. The crew chief said the wind was up and the fire was moving again and they were, too."

Jack and Leonard jostled through the tent flap, stopping dead just outside, watching the fire scrawl a line across the hill.

"Hell," said Leonard. "It's crowned," and Jack imagined it racing through the treetops, feeding on the wind flowing above it, sucking oxygen from the air below. He knew as well as Leonard that anyone beneath it stood as good a chance of suffocating as of burning, the fire reaching deep into lungs, pulling the air right out.

Fire camps were usually noisy places, crews who only saw each other a few times a year getting reacquainted, letting off steam after a day on fire. This was the quietest camp Jack had ever been in, and as he lay in his sleeping bag, he sensed dozens of others just like him, awake, straining to-

ward the mountain. One of the ranchers from Red Lodge had brought up a mule train, but Jack had seen the pack saddles, heavy rubber bags folded onto them, and knew what they expected to bring back.

Morning brought a rush of feet past his tent. Somehow, Jack had fallen asleep, but he'd left his clothes on, even his boots, and the laces flapped around his ankles as he ran to join the crews. They lined the trail, a gauntlet of yellow-clad men, a few women, the Indian crews standing together. The rancher came down first, leading a mule gone lame. As it stutter-stepped behind him, the rancher stared down at the ground and shook his head in response to the unspoken questions.

The next mule's cargo was draped over its back, the bag swaying as the mule lurched down the steep slope into camp. Behind it came three more, and Jack looked away from the bags, wrapped tight around their abbreviated contents. A man sat the fifth mule, his bandaged hands and arms crossed before his chest, his face tarry with smoke except for the wet smears beneath his eyes, and the men lining the trail reached out to touch his calf, his knee, to caress the mule's flanks.

"They left some up there," somebody said, the whisper floating down the line like the wisps of fog burning off in the early-morning light. Jack stepped out onto the trail. He would go up there. He would find her. He would bring her back. But people hauled at him, yanking him back. Yet one more came down the trail, this one on foot, and it was Annie, moving slow and stiff, but walking just the same, holding her bandaged hands like oversize mittens away from her sides. Salve shined her face, but her eyes were dry. Her gaze flicked toward him. He started to bring his arms up to wrap them around her, let her know she would be all right now, but she hitched her shoulder and edged past him. She stopped where Leonard waited, and they read each other's faces, seeing the fire that each of them knew, and then they turned and walked together, not touching, cutting across the field to the

medical tent while Jack stood on the hillside, alone now, the others heading for the buses in sad, silent clusters.

He finished up hotshot training that winter at the Interagency Fire Center in Boise. Annie was there, too, getting recertified, and when she spotted Jack she told him in person what she'd told him so often on the phone.

"It's not going to happen," she said.

"Just tell me why," he said. "I'm going to be a hotshot," he added.

This time, she couldn't hang up on him. She looked at him a while and then she took him outside and they sat together on a low wall while she told him how things had gone that day in the Beartooths. Jack kept his eyes fixed on the alpenglow softening the darkness draping the bald hills surrounding Boise, seeing the Beartooths shining fire instead.

"It was almost dark when the helicopters finally gave up and left," she said. "But it was like daytime up on that mountain." She told him how she'd stooped and yanked at a handful of grass, held her hand high and opened it. But the fire was creating its own wind currents and the grass swirled and eddied in the air. There was no way of telling which way the fire could go, and the crew was deep in tindery stuff, shoving their way through shoulder-high scrub oaks whose leaves crunched like kindling beneath their feet.

"There were some rocks up above and we headed that way," she said. "We knew we'd cook if we got caught in those oaks," and she didn't have to say the rest—no chance of smoke inhalation, nice and drowsy. Just the flames wrapping them tight, fast, but not fast enough.

And everybody else knew it, too, she told him; they were quick-stepping, dropping their Pulaskis and chainsaws. Then she felt it on the back of her neck like a hot breath, heard it roaring up behind, shouldn't even have turned to look, but couldn't help herself, the flames towering up into

the pine canopy and beyond, carving their way high into the black sky, and the wind bent the fire toward them, and she let her pack slide to the ground and sprinted, the others ahead of her, the rocks still too far.

“One of the guys stopped,” she said. She took a breath. “I hit him,” she said, and was quiet again. “But he wanted to use the shake-and-bake bag.”

Jack held up his hand, remembering the mules’ fore-shortened cargo. The foil-fabric fire shelters were fine as far as they went, he knew, but they didn’t go far at all in a place with that much fuel, where the fire would linger instead of moving past.

“All I could think of was the rocks,” Annie said. “The rocks. The rocks.”

She could feel the fire shimmering fierce behind her when she hit the patch of bare earth behind the boulders, shaking out the shelter, hooking her hands and feet into the loops in the corners, spread-eagling herself face-down, sucking in dirt.

“But it got me anyway. Here,” she said, holding out her arms, showing him how they stuck out of her Nomex sleeves when the fire came licking under the shelter. “They don’t tell you about that in the training.” Ropes of scar tissue bound her wrists. He reached to touch them, but she pulled her hands back in awkward, wavelike motions to show how the fire moved across her.

“It lifted me up,” she said. “It slammed me back down.” She could feel the breath leaving her and the thing is, she said, her voice suddenly loud, almost shouting, she didn’t care.

“Stop,” said Jack.

He bent his face to his knees. He felt her hand, not gentle, grasping his hair, hauling his head up, forcing him to look again into her eyes.

“So you understand now,” she said. “You see?”

He nodded. He didn't understand, knew he never would, but he saw—saw her that day on the mountain, finally knowing for himself what she'd known at that moment: That everything would be different for her; that she wasn't like other people anymore.

She was on fire.
