

# Prologue

The door of *Jump 17* opens to an unnerving roar, swings aside, and reveals four hundred acres of fire crowning in black spruce. Orange tongues of burning gases lick high into the air. Coils of black smoke roll up from a flame front a mile wide. At the fire's head, flames eighty feet high whip back and forth as if trying to tear themselves free from the earth. At fifteen hundred feet, we orbit and look down. The smoke column rises out of a blue-green landscape to tower above us, its lower third brown and black, its middle a marbled yellow-gray, its top a crown of sunlit silver.

Air rushes into the airplane—thin mountain air, sweetly laced with the scent of woodsmoke. The roar is so loud we can barely shout above it. Hitting turbulence, we bounce weightlessly, then slam down on the cargo. From the pit of my stomach nausea flows through the rest of my body. My breathing is rapid and shallow, tightly constrained by the chest strap on my jump harness. I struggle to my feet, grab the overhead cable, and make my way to the door. We have an eight-man load. I will jump first.

*Jump 17* lines up for our initial pass over the jump spot. Dalan Romero drops the first set of drift streamers. Banking into a turn, we watch the streamers—one red, one blue, and one yellow—flutter

brightly against the backdrop of the dark forest, then suddenly waver, tumble end over end, and sweep in toward the fire. We make a second pass to drop another set. They do the same.

I watch through the door as the fire crests a ridge that drops into a valley containing a log home, a barn, and several outbuildings. From the fire to the homestead it is less than half a mile. Horses circle in a large corral. A bulldozer is shoving trees back away from the main house. There is a forty-acre barley field and a rough airstrip.

Dalan's head is out into the slipstream looking forward under the belly of *Jump 17* again. I pull on my helmet, snap the chin strap, drop the heavy wire-mesh mask down over my face, and pull on my Nomex gloves.

Dalan pulls his head back in. Grave, but apparently satisfied with what he's seen, he shouts over his headset to the pilots, "Take us to three thousand."

Dalan turns to me, holding up two fingers, and I step closer to the door and brace myself, being careful not to get sucked out by the slipstream. Kubichek, my jump partner, takes his place inches behind me.

"Looks like about five hundred yards of drift," Dalan yells. "The winds are tricky down low. Stay wide of the fire. The jump spot's in the shadow of the column there in that little meadow just north of the barn. Do you see it?"

I nod yes.

Again Dalan's head is out the door and looking forward under the plane. I hear the pilot over the intercom. "We got three thousand, Dalan, we got three thousand." Dalan says something back into his headset, and then his eyes are back on me.

"OK, two jumpers," he commands. "Are you ready?"

I nod yes.

"Get in the door."

I drop into a sitting position, my legs hanging out into the slipstream. Kubichek is close behind, waiting. Sitting there in the door, even though the fire is more than a mile away, I can feel the heat on my face.

Again Dalan's head is out and looking. My field of vision fills with a panorama of the Alaska Range. The land below runs in a flat incline, rising east to the cloud-shadowed foothills of the Toklat River Valley. Beyond the hills, thrusting up out of the earth, is a world of jagged black peaks, blue ice walls, and massive snowfields—the heart of Denali National Park, a stronghold left over from the Ice Age, at once forbidding and magnificent.

Dalan pulls his head in, shoots me a quick glance, then raises his arm behind my back. “Get ready!”

The slap comes down hard on my shoulder, and I propel myself forward with all my strength. In the next instant I am out and counting.

“Jump-thousand, look-thousand . . .”

The earth and the sky revolve in a blur of tilted horizons, aircraft wings, greens, blues, and rushing noise. My body pitches sideways to the right as I watch my boots fly higher than my head. I fall downward at ninety miles per hour. The forest, the fire, and the mountains rotate in a spin below. I look up as Kubichek clears the door—he, too, becomes a dark silhouette tumbling in the blue.

“Reach-thousand . . .”

My right hand reaches for the green rip cord. My fingers curl around it tightly.

“Wait-thousand . . .”

I am aware of what hangs in the balance of the next few seconds. Resisting the temptation to pull early, I wait out that odd, warped moment when time stretches, then begins to tear.

“Pull-thousand . . .”

My hand pulls across my chest and shoots out to the side. I feel myself tilt forward, then a tugging sensation across my shoulders, and the chute is off my back and struggling to open. Tossing my head back, I watch, and there it comes, billowing into a gleaming rectangle of brilliant orange and white. In the aftermath of the roar there comes a startling silence.

I check the rear corners of my chute for tension knots, then reach for my steering toggles, pull down left, and come around into the wind.

I look down. The head of the fire has temporarily halted along the crest of the ridge while the ground fire spills down into the valley.

Kubichek lets out a long, whooping yell. He, too, has just opened. I yell back, then turn and try to orient to the jump spot.

The smoke column rises high overhead, casting an ominous shadow far over the land. Facing into the wind, I try to locate the jump spot. I feel my gut tighten as I watch the ground pass below, appearing to surge one way and then the other as the chute rocks back and forth. Pulling down on the left toggle, I begin moving closer to the wind line. Still, I can't make out the jump spot. I yell at Kubichek that I can't see the spot. He yells something back and starts laughing.

Lightning arcs down out of the top of the smoke column and strikes the ground between me and the fire. Thunder cracks loudly, trailing off in a rumble. Sunlight streams down through a hole in the smoke to pool green and gold upon the land as it might on the floor of a cathedral. A small sunny meadow appears. Kubi and I yell out in unison. In that moment I feel as if I can fly on and on forever, sailing high above all the great forests and wilderness on earth, out beyond the farthest horizon, into the infinite darkness to drift among the stars.