

# Playing with Fire

By

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# Chapter 1

Fire, he decided, that's what it looked like. Brilliant, glinting, sparking fire. Except that when you spoke of fire, you usually meant a redhead. And her hair wasn't red, it was a deep rich brown, with just enough copper running through it to make it glint under the bar lights like a penny in the sun.

Catching himself, Cade brought the thought up short with a muttered oath. He tossed back his whiskey and had Joe, the bartender, set him up with a beer instead. He must be getting drunker than he thought, mooning over a complete stranger.

He'd been watching her since she came into the bar a couple of hours earlier. Though she was only a tiny wisp of a thing, it was hard not to notice her when her jeans looked like she'd been poured into them and that skimpy neon green halter top left very little to a man's imagination. He'd watched as she had slowly but steadily worked her way around the bar, leaving a trail of men in her wake. He'd known almost instantly this was the kind of woman that plowed through men like a bulldozer and tossed them away like yesterday's trash. The kind of woman he generally regarded as only a few steps above a cheap hooker. The kind he knew without question he wanted no part of. So why the hell hadn't he been able to take his eyes off her for the past two hours?

He heard her laugh then, a high flirty giggle that should have irritated him, but instead had him turning to scan the crowd for her before he could stop himself. She was at the end of the bar to his right, all but draped over some poor slob who was doing his best not to trip over his tongue.

The flash of jealousy that ripped through him was completely unexpected. As soon as it passed, he plunked his beer deliberately on the bar and began to dig in his pocket for his cash. It was obviously time to call it a night if he was ready to fight over some anonymous woman he didn't even know. He thought again of that tiny scrap of fabric she called a top. And a dangerous woman at that.

She turned then, and he saw her face clearly for the first time. Guilt and fury instantly replaced his slight interest. This wasn't a woman, dangerous or otherwise. She was a kid.

Actually, Anastasia Reinhardt was two weeks past her twenty-second birthday, but since she didn't quite make five feet and had big, round blue eyes that despite her best efforts, always had more of the wide-eyed innocent look than the sexy, sultry look she would have vastly preferred, she was used to people thinking she was far younger. That was why she always had to work so much harder to prove she was all woman. Since the guy on the barstool across from her was currently doing all he could to avoid drooling onto her shirt, Stacy figured she'd proven her point. Really, it was almost too easy. The ring line had thrown her. He was obviously married so

he should have been a challenge, but this guy was so lonely she'd barely even had to try. She could have been in his bed thirty minutes ago if she'd wanted, but she'd wanted to have a little fun first.

Leaning close, she whispered into the lonely husband's ear that she wanted a drink. He nodded dumbly and hurried to do her bidding, leaving her free to scan the crowd for prospects. She turned around and leaned against the bar, browsing the crowd disinterestedly. There wasn't a soul around who seemed even remotely challenging. Then, her gaze fell on a man at the opposite end of the bar. Well, really more like a mountain than a man. The man was huge. He had to be at least six-four, and he gave the impression of being carved out of solid rock. More than that, the man simply radiated authority. Now that would be a challenge.

Briefly, Stacy debated ditching the lonely husband and trying her hand with him, but just as quickly decided against it. A man like that would require all her energy and she'd already wasted too much energy on the husband to be in top form. For now, she'd be content with spending an utterly unchallenging night with the lonely husband and formulating her plan of attack. Then, when the mountain came in again, she'd be ready.

That decided, she turned back to amusing herself with watching the mountain for a little longer, but found he had already disappeared. Sighing, she resigned herself to munching halfheartedly on the pretzels Joe had placed before her on the bar and praying the husband would hurry back with her beer.

Suddenly, Stacy found herself being jerked from her bored musings as she was hauled from her barstool and plopped unceremoniously on her feet. "Go home kid," a rumbling male voice said from behind her. Stacy whirled, fully intending to tell the voice's owner exactly what he could do with his orders and manhandling, and ran straight into the mountain. Well, well, there might be a little challenge left in this night after all.

The short brutal battle to push his way through the crowd to her had done little to improve Cade's temper. He was furious with himself for being attracted to a kid like some kind of pervert. What the hell had he been thinking? Granted, she'd been flaunting everything she had to every man in the place, but she was a kid, damn it. He'd bet his last dollar that she'd yet to see her sixteenth birthday. You didn't have the kind of thoughts he'd been having all night about a kid. Even the pond scum he'd once hauled in off the streets as a city cop had better scruples than that. Jesus.

What the hell had she been thinking sneaking in here alone anyway? Sure, Joe ran a fairly clean establishment, and she was less likely to get into trouble in here than in some of the seedier places over by the county line, but men and alcohol were a dangerous combination, especially when you played around with sex the way this kid had been all night. Couldn't she see she was setting herself up to get hurt in a bad way?

Up this close, he could see clearly the ungodly amount of makeup caked on her face and that irked his temper more. What kind of parents let their daughter get out of the house looking like that, anyway?

Then she rubbed against him like a cat and laid her hands on his chest and the heat simmering in his blood shot through the roof. Goddamnit, she was flirting with him.

He clamped down hard on the tremendously appealing urge to yank her up and turn her over his knee like the child she was. Instead, he plucked her hands away with deliberate coolness and said again, "Go home, kid."

"Hey now, don't be like that," Stacy purred, pulling out her best seductive pout. "All I want to do is have a little fun." She leaned closer and dropped her voice down to a husky whisper. "And believe me, I can be a lot of fun."

The ploy was as thick and obvious as a cheap porn flick. It shouldn't have affected him any more than the buzz of an annoying fly. But it did. The heat and nearness of her flooded straight to his groin, and that pissed him off. No, that made him mad as hell.

It was his anger with himself as much as anything that had him clamping a hand on her arm and dragging her toward the door. When he spoke, his voice was low and dangerous. "Get your underage ass out of here before I give in to the temptation to take you out back and give you the spanking you so richly deserve."

Almost without thinking, Stacy fell back on the flirting that came as natural as breathing. "Sorry, pretty boy, I don't play those kinds of games." Too late, she realized she'd made a tactical error when his hand tightened painfully around her arm. This time fury eclipsed flirting. "I don't know who the hell you think you are and where the hell you think you get off, but I'd suggest you take your hands off me before I lose my temper and have Joe call the cops on you."

He spared a glance at her and flashed a humorless and utterly dangerous smile. "Sweetheart, I am the cops."

"Good," Stacy said loftily, ignoring the icy knot that had suddenly formed in her stomach, "then you already know what will happen when they haul you in for assault and battery."

Cade didn't even break his stride. "You're just lucky I haven't decided to haul you in for underage drinking."

Stacy stilled and dug in her heels, bringing them both to an abrupt halt. "Will you stop saying that? I am not a child. I am 22 years old and last I heard that was well over the legal age in this state."

Cade whirled to face her, sneering. "Tell that lie to someone who'll believe it, kid. You're barely fifteen if you're a day."

"Great," Stacy muttered, digging into the pocket of her jeans for the slim wallet that held her drink money and ID. "First, you ruin a perfectly good evening with your caveman tactics, now you want to card me." Coming up with the wallet, she yanked out her driver's license and handed it to him. "See. It's right there in black and white. I'm twenty-two."

Cade scanned the card she'd handed him and agreed that based on the evidence in front of him, Anastasia Marie Reinhardt had recently turned twenty-two. Still, he'd been a cop too

long not to have a healthy dose of cynicism, and he wasn't quite ready to give up yet. "ID can be faked," was all he said.

Stacy met his gaze levelly. "They can, but it wasn't." To prove her point, she reached out and tilted the card so that the holographic seal the state had recently started imprinting as a protection against forgery was clearly displayed.

That could be forged too, a stubborn voice in the back of his mind insisted, but even as the thought formed Cade knew it was ridiculous. It could have indeed been forged, but someone who could pull off a forgery like that would have to be damn good. Too good for a fifteen-year-old kid looking to go bar hopping to afford. The plain truth was, she was a legal adult, if a young one, and he was a Class-A fool.

He had the grace to at least look embarrassed when he handed Stacy back her ID, but that cocky edge never slipped an inch. "Well, Anastasia," he said, rolling her name out in that deep rumble that sent shivers racing down her spine. "It appears we've had a misunderstanding. Forgive me for interrupting your evening."

Stacy shrugged. "No harm, no foul. Besides," she said, reaching out to trail a finger down the buttons of his shirt, "I know just how you can make it up to me."

Cade gripped her hand in his own and shoved it away. "Not a chance." He turned to go, leaving Stacy sputtering in his wake, but just before he disappeared into the smoke, he paused. "You watch your step. Kid." And then he was gone.

The heat was shimmering from the asphalt in waves when Cade stepped out of the aging brick building housing McCloud's small police department. Out of habit so long established as to be totally unconscious, he planted his hands on his hips and scanned the town, nodding casually to Pete Macklin and Melvin Wade who sat in front of the auto parts store playing checkers atop a discarded plastic shipping box. As far as Cade knew, they had been sitting in relatively the same spot for decades, and as long as they were still there he'd know that all was right with the world. Satisfied that all was well, he turned and headed toward his truck, pausing only long enough to fling a hasty salute to his godson, Nicky Graham, as he whizzed by on a battered red bicycle. Nicky never slowed, too intent on tackling summer with the full-throttled enthusiasm known only to nine-year-old boys. Cade grinned, shaking his head. God, had he ever been that young?

"Well, well, if it isn't the lawman."

Cade's head snapped up, and he noticed the woman lolling lazily against the hood of his cruiser for the first time. He had to fight hard to stifle the groan that sprang to his lips. All morning, he'd been doing his damndest to convince himself that the events that he remembered from last night were really only a whisky-soaked delusion, an unfortunate side-effect of letting one of his rare bar nights go just a bit too far. He'd almost made himself believe that he hadn't really made a fool of himself in the middle of Joe's bar, but since Anastasia Reinhardt now stood before him in the stone cold light of day; it appeared that the fates were not prepared to allow him to harbor that particular delusion.

She'd traded the skintight jeans and skimpy top for a conservative gray skirt and white blouse, but she'd left most of the top buttons of her blouse undone, clearly meaning to tease a man's imagination. She was doing entirely too good a job teasing his. Wrenching his mind away from those buttons by sheer force of will, he touched two fingers to the brim of his hat in a small salute. "Anastasia."

Stacy pushed off of the car and stood up. "I'm Stacy to everyone that matters."

Cade raised an eyebrow. "Do I matter?"

"You might."

Cade's eyebrow quirked higher. "Is that so?"

Stacey shrugged nonchalantly, tossing her hair over her shoulder. "Maybe."

This girl was trouble. The realization hit Cade all over again with the force of a blow. "I see," Cade said slowly, feeling as though he were tiptoeing through a minefield. "So, Stacy, what brings you here this morning?"

Again Stacy shrugged. "I was in the neighborhood," she said, hoping he wouldn't see it for the lie it was, though it wasn't entirely a lie. She was in the neighborhood. She'd spent the better part of her lunch break peering out the front window of her best friend Glory's shop, which just happened to be located across the street from the police station, waiting for him. "Thought I'd come by and see if you really were a cop. You are a real cop, aren't you?" she asked, just for the sheer pleasure of needling him.

"Of course I'm a cop," Cade sputtered indignantly. "What? Do you think I would willingly choose to traipse around in full uniform in this heat for fun?"

Stacy swallowed the laugh that threatened to bubble forth and lifted a casual eyebrow. "Some would."

Cade let out an exasperated sigh. "You gonna ask to see my badge now?"

Stacy studied him for a long moment. "Yes."

Rolling his eyes, Cade reached into his pocket for the leather case that held his badge and ID and tossed it at her.

Stacy caught it deftly, grinning at him. She flipped the case open and spent what seemed like an eternity scrutinizing its contents. Finally, she looked up at him and said solemnly, "These can be faked you know."

"They can," Cade said dryly, managing to keep the grin from his lips but not his eyes, "but it wasn't."

She tilted her head and grinned impishly at him, managing somehow to look like a little girl despite her provocative dress. "Ok."

"Satisfied?" Cade asked.

Stacy arched an eyebrow, a sly smile playing at the corner of her mouth. "Not yet," she purred, "but I could be."



“Sorry, you’re not my type,” he told her. There was no denying he was attracted to her. He’d always been drawn to petite women and Stacy was no exception, but he was a traditional man – some would say old fashioned – and a woman like Stacy was nothing but trouble.

“How do you know?” Stacy questioned. “You don’t even know me.”

“I know enough,” Cade said.

Stacy hitched a hip up on the hood of his cruiser and crossed her arms. “And just what do you know since you know me so well?” she asked smugly, eyeing him.

“Let’s just say I’m a one woman man, and from what I saw last night, it’s easy to tell you’re not a one man woman,” Cade answered.

“I could be if I wanted to be. I’ve just never wanted to be,” Stacy replied automatically. It was her standard reply. She’d said it so many times she almost believed it herself.

Cade, however, didn’t buy it. “Really?” he countered. “Have you ever dated one guy exclusively for any length of time?”

“Well, no,” Stacy admitted reluctantly. She’d always wanted to find The One, but she got bored quickly, and she always seemed to somehow need more than any one man could provide. “But just because I haven’t doesn’t mean I couldn’t.” At least that was what she always told herself.

“Please, kid,” Cade said sarcastically. “You couldn’t stay put if you had to. You’d go stir crazy and run for the hills inside of a month.”

“Would not,” Stacy insisted, sounding for all the world like a belligerent two-year-old.

Cade bit back the smile he knew Stacy wouldn’t appreciate. “Prove it,” he challenged. “I dare you to try dating one man exclusively for one month.”

“And why should I bother taking your dare,” Stacy wanted to know.

“Because,” Cade replied, “if—and I stress the word if—you manage to do it—not that I think you will—you’ll get the satisfaction of proving me wrong.” And if she didn’t, he’d be able to prove to himself this crazy attraction was futile without hurting either of them.

“And why would you think that would matter?” Stacy asked.

Cade grinned. “Because you, Anastasia, strike me as the sort of woman who loves being right.”

Unable to deny it, Stacy countered, “Fine. I get off at five. What about you?”

“Why?” Cade wondered, suddenly feeling apprehensive.

“Why do you think?” Stacy asked pointedly. “If we’re going to do this dating thing, we may as well get started. No time like the present and all that jazz.”

“We?” Cade sputtered. “Who said anything about we? I distinctly remember saying you.”

“If I remember correctly,” Stacy said, “your terms were that I date one man exclusively for one month.”

“Yeah,” Cade agreed, “so...” For the life of him, he still couldn’t see how this had anything to do with him.

“So,” Stacy continued patiently, as though explaining something to a child for the millionth time, “you’re the man.”

“Me?” Cade gaped at her, openmouthed. “I didn’t mean me. I meant one of the guys you’re already seeing.”

Stacy shrugged. “Like you said, I’m not seeing anybody, exactly.”

“Yeah, well, I know, but...” Cade stammered, still unable to wrap his mind around this sudden turn of events.

“Any reason it can’t be you?” Stacy pressed.

Yes, Cade’s mind screamed, thousands of them. Not the least of which was that he’d probably end up losing his patience and spanking her within an inch of her life. This was supposed to prove he couldn’t get involved with her not get him even more involved.

“Well, are you seeing somebody or what?” Stacy asked impatiently.

It would have been easy enough to say he was, but in a town this small, the truth was bound to come out, and Cade Dawson was many things, but a liar wasn’t one of them. “No,” he admitted, somewhat reluctantly.

“Ok then,” Stacy said breezily. “That settles it—unless, of course, you can’t handle me.” She added the latter almost as an afterthought, challenge glinting in her eyes.

“Oh I can handle you,” Cade assured her. It wasn’t whether or not he could handle her that worried him. It was how to handle her. “I’m not sure you can handle me.”

Stacy laughed, reveling in the challenge even as she congratulated herself on the victory. “Oh don’t you worry, lawman. I can handle you.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” Cade told her. “I’m a difficult man, if we’re going to do this, you should know that from the start. My job is crazy, and I work all hours. There will be broken dates and plans changed at the last minute, and I have little tolerance for temper tantrums when that happens. If you can’t handle that, get out now. Find another guy, or drop this crazy dare all together.”

“If you think you can shake me that easy, you don’t know me nearly as well as you think,” Stacy said bluntly.

“I’m serious, dammit,” Cade said in exasperation.

Stacy leveled her gaze on him, as serious as he’d ever seen her. “You’re a cop, I get that. I told you. I can handle you.”

Cade sighed. For all Stacy’s reassurances, he had serious doubts. He had a feeling Stacy was going to have a far harder time handling him than she thought, and not only because of his job.

“So,” Stacy asked again, “what time do you get off tonight?”

“Not so fast,” Cade said. “There’s one more thing you need to know.”

“What now?” Stacy huffed. “You have some exotic incurable disease, or there’s a weird old lady chained in your basement.” She paused long enough to roll her eyes. “Come on, you’re a cop. How many vices could you possibly have?”

If you only knew, Cade thought, but what he said was, “Not a vice, a rule. I do not share, period. If we’re going to date, I won’t share you with another man. No casual dates, no flings, nothing.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Stacy replied, brushing him off with a wave of her hand. “Exclusive, I know. That’s kinda the point. I can do that. What about tonight?”

Cade eyed her, raking a hand through his hair. At this point, he was beginning to wonder whether he could handle this. He felt as though he’d suddenly taken a step off of a high cliff and there was no way to stop the fall, and the damndest thing was, he’d done it to himself.

“I’m scheduled till five. Barring any major disaster, I should be able to get away then,” he answered.

“Major disaster,” Stacy repeated with a laugh. “Just what sort of major disaster can you possibly have in a place like McCloud?”

You’d be surprised, Cade thought. Even a tiny rural town like McCloud had its share of problems, but rather than telling her that, he flashed her a grin. “Let’s just hope Mrs. Crowder’s cat doesn’t decide to climb up on the roof again.” That brought a laugh, as he had known it would. Betsy Crowder’s devotion to her ancient, overweight and exceedingly ornery cat was the stuff of small town legend.

“God forbid,” Stacy said, still laughing. She stood up, unconsciously smoothing her skirt as she did. “And on that note, I’ve got to get back to work.” She started to walk away then stopped and called back over her shoulder. “I’ll see you at six. Pick me up at home.”

“And where is that?” Cade asked.

Stacy shot him a saucy, challenging grin. “You’re a cop. Find me.”

Cade laughed and watched her go. Finding her wasn’t the problem. There were barely eight hundred people in McCloud. Everybody knew everybody else. All he had to do was ask a few questions, and he could find not only her house, but her entire life history and family history, which, if she had grown up here, could easily go back several generations. No, finding her wasn’t the problem. The problem was, what the hell was he supposed to do then?