

Gayle Farmer

FIRESTORM



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In gratitude

**This book is dedicated to the
California Firefighters**

And

**to all those brave men and women
across our country
who risk their lives every day
so that we can be safe.**

Thank you

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Chapter 1

Molly Kramer stared out the window of the SUV, working hard at keeping the bored expression on her face. At fifteen, she was much too grown up to show the excitement she felt. Long, slender fingers twirled a lock of straight blonde hair that shimmered down her shoulder.

Beth Chapman, co-adventurer and best friend, sat on the middle seat beside Molly, absently plucking at the hem of her pink shorts and tapping her foot. Gray-blue eyes wide with anticipation, she nudged Molly and nodded at a billboard of Shamu jumping high out of the water. They giggled under their breath.

As befitting his inferior age, sex and status, Danny Kramer bounced around the back of the SUV, alternately pointing at signs and giving a running commentary on what he planned to do once they got inside the park.

“First off, I wanna see Shamu. Last time the place was so packed I couldn’t see everything. That’s why I’m glad we’re here early, Mom. Then the polar bears, y’know. They’re the coolest and since they’re right next to the penguins, I plan to spend lots of time hanging out there.”

He patted his pocket and grinned. “I brought my camera, too. I want you to take loads of pictures of me and the animals, okay, Mom?”

As he paused to catch his breath, Molly turned around and glared at her brother. “Where’s your off switch? You’re babbling like a flippin’ idiot.” She crossed her eyes and stuck out her tongue.

Face as straight as a poker, Beth said, “But then again, Danny can’t help it. Can you? You were just *born* an obnoxious little bugger.”

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Danny grinned at her. “Bite me, dog face.” Impervious, insolent, he stared at her a moment longer, smirking. He slowly returned his attention to his parents. “Sea World is my fave of all the parks, Dad. Even better than Disneyland. I like the animals better than the rides, don’t you? I mean, when you think of it, here you get both....” He continued to stare at Beth from under his lashes as he rolled through his monologue.

Molly and Beth jumped out of the car, wide smiles of anticipation parting their lips. Desperate to get away from Danny, they hurried to the admission booth, joined the short line, bought their tickets and entered the park.

Dave Kramer called to the girls as he came through the gates, eyebrows up, prepared with the usual speech. “Check your cell phones for service.”

They did so, nodding in agreement.

“You girls know the drill. Stay together at all times, especially in the restrooms. Buddy system, right? I wish you’d stay with us.” He cast a quick glance at his son and shrugged. “But I know you’ll have more fun if you’re off on your own. We’ll have our first meet-up at the dolphin display in two hours. Ten o’clock sharp.”

“We’ll be there, Dad. See ya later.”

Molly breathed a sigh of relief as they walked away from her family. “That kid makes me crazy.” She ran a hand through her hair, lips bunched up like she smelled something bad.

“He’s a total idiot.”

“Really, Beth, I could kill him. I keep telling Dad he has ADHD or something, but he just gives me this look and talks about how I’m older and should cut him some slack. The only slack he gets from me is the rope around his neck, just before I strangle him.” Molly made a face and shrugged.

“He makes me glad to be an only child.” Beth chuckled as she unzipped her fanny pack and withdrew some money. “I don’t think I could live in a house where he lurked around every corner.

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Besides, talking about him is a downer and a waste of time. I'm starved. We left so early, I didn't get breakfast this morning."

"Me, too, but then, I'm always famished. I guess this isn't the time to think about diet. I'm gonna get an ice cream waffle."

"Oh, yes. Chocolate."

Laughing, they got in line, indulging themselves in their favorite pastime – people watching. Molly saw him first.

"Hottie alert, man. Look at that guy over there ... the one with the dark wavy hair. Oh, the dude is, like, serious whoa."

Beth nodded, blinking as the hot waffle and cold ice cream gave her teeth fits. She raised a finger, swallowed and mumbled, "Tight buns. Hot eye candy." She studied him a bit longer and nodded. "I could deal with that, couldn't you?"

Molly nodded several times, keeping her eye peeled for new guys to rate. "I think it's really important that a guy look hot, don't you? I hate that boy next door, squeaky clean look."

"He's got a great ass, that's for sure. Lips, too. I bet he's a good kisser."

"Definitely a bad boy; oh, man, here comes another one." Molly nodded over her shoulder at what had to be a lifeguard on his day off. Light blond hair, an impossible tan and a tight, athletic body made her eyes pop. "Check it out."

"Oh, man. Now that's my idea of a foxy looking dude."

"Uh huh."

By ten o'clock the lines had lengthened as park patrons laughed, ate and drank. Dave saw the girls first and waved his arms to get their attention.

Beth nudged Molly and nodded. "Parent sighting." They picked up speed, weaving in and out of the crowd, pretending they were on skates.

"So, what did you do first?" Susan Kramer grinned at the girls, eyes alight. "I bet I know ... ice cream waffle, right?"

They laughed in agreement. "Chocolate!"

"That's just what you needed, bubble butt." Danny snickered, grinning at Beth and gazing pointedly at her derriere.

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She stared at him with wintery blue eyes, refusing to pick up the gauntlet. Dark, swooping eyebrows rose and her brow furrowed. Beth mouthed the word *asshole*, making sure only Danny could see her.

Dave's face turned bright red and scowls creased his forehead. "Danny! What kind of talk is *that*? Knock it off. Did you leave your manners at home?" He pursed his lips and continued to frown at his son. "If you think that's cute or somehow attractive, you're clueless."

"Oh, he talks to me like that at home, too. It's nothing new." Beth maintained her stare, refusing to break eye contact with Danny. The slightest of smirks curled her lips as Dave continued to scold.

Disgusted, Molly threw her hands in the air. "He has no manners to leave, at home or anywhere else. I keep telling you he's a first class geek." She stopped short and shot an uneasy glance at her Dad, not wanting to launch a full scale debate of Danny's good and bad points. "So, what did you guys get to do so far? Have you seen the climbing wall over at the arcade? We're going to give it a go."

"Whoa, that sounds like fun," Danny said, easily diverted. "I did that the last time. It's a ball. You guys gonna give it a try? That'd be something I'd sure like to watch." He turned toward Beth, opened his mouth as though to speak and then closed it, returning his gaze to her butt.

Dave nodded at the girls. "We're going over to Shipwreck Café for lunch. I already made reservations for twelve-thirty. If you happen to get there first, have them show you to the table. Be good and we'll see you in a couple of hours."

Molly glanced at Beth and shrugged. "I know it's crazy ... the little pervert-monster is only twelve, but I swear Danny has the hots for you."

"Gee, ya think? What was your first clue? I could drop-kick the little sucker, I swear. You must be blind if you're saying you never noticed how he stares at me? *Little freak!* All the lewd

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remarks and comments about my looks?" She ran a hand through her shiny black hair and pursed her lips. "Jerk."

"You should be used to it by now. It's the price you pay for being so beautiful, I guess. And okay, I admit it. I have noticed. At first it was funny, y'know, but lately he's just rude; that last remark he made was too much. I swear, I thought Dad would bust a gut. Actually, Danny's lucky Dad isn't into making a scene in public. And Mom?" She swept her hand, palm down across the top of her head. "I mean, like it went right over her head. It's like she's on another planet or something."

They got in the rock climbing line and glanced around the park as they inched forward.

"Oh, look over there. There's that guy again, remember? The one with the dark hair? He's so hot." Beth prodded Molly with her elbow as she smiled at the young man. "He's staring at me."

"How old do you think he is?"

"I don't know, seventeen, eighteen? Ya think?"

"Yeah, about that, I guess, maybe older. Oh my God, he's walking over here. Are you gonna talk...." Her voice rose to a squeak.

He stopped at an empty bench about thirty feet from the girls and sat facing toward the rock climbing wall, sipping his soda. From time to time he'd glance at Beth then smile and turn away, attention riveted on the crowd.

It was finally their turn to climb. The exhibit operator beckoned Molly forward and hitched her into the safety harness. He started to tell her how everything worked, but after a quick recitation of her experience he accepted that she'd done this dozens of times before and knew the drill.

"Have fun." He turned to Beth, helping her adjust the harness.

Being seasoned climbers, they scaled the wall like little spider monkeys and then rappelled down even faster. They got in six climbs before the operator waved them off.

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“You gals are really good,” he said, helping Molly out of the harness. He moved over to Beth, smile wide. “Come back later when the crowds are thinned out and I’ll let you go for a long run.”

“Sweet!” they said in unison. “We’ll be back.”

* * *

He watched the girls scale the wall, long golden legs reaching for the incuts and bulges that offered support; slender but muscular arms gripped the handholds. He licked his lips and grimaced several times at the sight of Beth’s legs. Her short shorts caused perspiration to bathe his upper lip.

His breath came quick and fast as he stared, his stomach aching. The feeling passed and with a casual expression on his face, he rose from the bench, glanced around at the crowd and followed the girls to the next display.

They stopped at the polar bear area and worked their way toward the front of the crowd. It was feeding time and the attendants threw fish into the cage to the delight of bears and park guests alike.

He followed closely and stopped right behind Beth. He moved closer, now bare inches from her back. He leaned over and drew a deep breath, savoring her perfume and her personal, individual aroma. Her long hair wafted in the gentle breeze, black as a raven’s wing.

Quiet, he waited for her to notice him. It took her several moments before she realized he was there.

“Oh,” she said, moving away. She gazed up into his dark, deep-set eyes.

“Hi,” he said, smile wide and engaging, eyes crinkled at the corners. “I’m Sam Hudson. What’s your name?”

“I’m Beth Chapman and this is my friend, Molly Kramer.” The girls exchanged a quick glance.

He leaned forward and grinned at Molly, hoping she wasn’t going to be a problem. “Is this your first time at the park or do you come here all the time?”

“No,” they replied slowly. “We come here a couple of times a year. How about you?”

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“I’m a first timer and this place is everything I heard it would be and then some. The exhibits are great, don’t ya think? I just moved down here, actually. I start college in the fall.”

“Oh, where do you go?” Molly asked, her tone a tad warmer.

“Ah, USD. How about you girls? What college do you go to?”

They broke out in laughter, shaking their heads. “We’ll be juniors in high school in September.”

“I don’t believe it. You’re kidding. Wow.” His tone became at once familiar and congratulatory. “You could have fooled me. Most high school kids are pretty dumb but you seem so much more grown up and sophisticated.”

He glanced around as the aroma of grilling meat wafted through the air. “Man, I’m as hungry as one of those bears in there. Don’t the burgers smell great? You want to join me? There’s pizza and all kinds of sandwiches if you don’t want burgers. My treat.”

“Sorry, we can’t,” Molly said. “We’re meeting my parents at the Shipwreck in ten minutes.”

He glanced at them, a conspiratorial grin on his lips. “Ah, why not blow them off? I bet you’d have more fun with me.”

Beth chuckled. “There’s no doubt about that.”

“It might be more fun, for sure, but not for long. My father would pitch a fit ... life would not be worth living for the rest of the summer. At the very least.”

Sam hesitated a moment, then shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, you gals have a nice lunch. I’m sure we’ll bump into each other again.” He waved at them then turned and walked away.

The girls watched the antics of the bears as they dove into the icy pool for their live dinners, coming up with a wiggling fish in their powerful jaws. They meandered down the walkway and headed to the restaurant, deep in thought.

Molly glanced at Beth and shook her head. “What did you make of Sam?”

“Sweet, fun to talk to and he’s even hotter close up.” She grinned at Molly and shrugged. “Great bod and just right with the

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muscles. I hate that bulked up look, y'know?" She puffed up her cheeks, rocked back and forth and made sounds like a mad monkey. "But him? I like his looks, muchly. Plus, he'd just shaved. Man, I hate that prickly look. What makes guys think girls like that?"

Molly nodded, continuing to scan the crowd. "Beats me; some stupid actor started it, I guess. Actually, the grunge look really turns me off. Can you imagine the breakouts you'd get after kissing someone like that? Eeuw, not my bag, but you know what? He's a lot older than we first thought. I bet he's at least twenty-five."

"Give me a break. Nah, I bet he's only, like, eighteen. He's just starting college, so how old is that... eighteen? Isn't that right?"

"You can start college at any age, and I'd guess at least twenty ... he just looked older, he seemed older. Well, when you consider we're only fifteen, twenty *is* older. I can't imagine what he sees in us."

They walked along in silence. Finally Molly said, "The more I think about it, the more I mean it ... I don't like him. There was just something off."

"Why are you obsessing about this?" Beth said. "He seemed very nice and friendly. Besides, who cares; it doesn't really matter. We'll probably never see him again."

Molly chuckled. "I wouldn't bet on that. He really liked you."

"Give me a break. You know that's just silly."

They approached the host station at the restaurant and Molly gave her name for the reservation.

"Please follow me." He led them to a large corner table in the back of the room. Beth chose the chair next to the high bank of windows, Molly at her right. The host placed five menus on the table and left.

"Can I ask you a question?" Beth glanced at her friend, eyebrows up, her face wearing a puzzled expression. "Why don't you like Sam? You're usually a really good judge of character, so it's making me wonder. Is it anything in particular or just one of your famous feelings?"

Molly grimaced and leaned back in her chair. "Well, famous feelings, I guess. I don't know the first thing about him, but

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neither do you. He gives me the creeps, like he's playing with us or something. And yes, it's kinda like that, sort of a premonition. But mine often turn out right, huh? How about that Maggie? I told you she was a witch from the get-go." She took a long sip of water, shrugged at her best friend and continued.

"Sam is, I don't know, it feels like he's lying about something and I still think he's way too old to be interested in us, don't you?"

Beth exaggerated her yawn. "I'm not even sure he *is* interested. What makes you think that, anyway? He was just making conversation. Once you told him we had to meet your family for lunch it seemed to me like he lost interest. You're making too big a deal out of a whole lot of nothin', Mol. I just figured he was new to the area, maybe wanting to make some friends. You know how that is. I didn't think he was pushy or anything, did you? He just seemed friendly to me."

"Well, for one thing, even if he did think we looked his age, once he found out the truth, you'd think he'd bail. We're, like, jail bait, y'know? Kids!"

"If you think about it, Molly, that's just about what he did do. Once we refused to have lunch with him, it didn't take long for him to split."

"That's true, I guess," she said, nodding but not convinced. "And isn't it strange he wanted to eat with you so bad he invited us both on his treat? Like, that's a ton of money to spend on strangers he'd never see again, and so odd to include me...." Her voice crackled and she waved her hand at the waiter. "Can you bring us some lemonade?"

She took a long sip of the frosty drink, shaking her head. "Man, I was so thirsty, I couldn't say another word." She cleared her throat and grinned at the icy pitcher. "That's great. Anyway, I suppose he might have just bumped into us at the polar bear exhibit, but we first noticed him when we got our waffle, remember, early this morning? The next time we saw him was at the climbing wall, and like you said, maybe it's a coincidence, but Beth, *maybe* he followed us, picked us out of the crowd. Maybe? And if so, why?"

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“Oh, Molly. You make it sound all creepy and stuff. Where’s that coming from? He’s new in town and only wanted to make friends, even just for the day.”

“But that’s the thing, part of what I’m saying. *We’re* not friend material for a guy that age ... he’d consider us kids. You know that as well as I do. I mean we’re only three years older than Danny and I can’t imagine willingly spending a second with a kid his age, especially not like *that*. Y’know what I mean? Why’s he wasting time with us when all these college girls are here and available? He’s a good lookin’ dude and obviously has money, so why bother with two kids? I wonder what Dad will say?”

Beth’s eyes flew open. “Oh, my God, you’ve gotta be kidding, right? Don’t you dare ... God, don’t tell him, Molly. If you tell him, we’re gonna have serious issues for the whole summer. For one thing, we’ll have to stay with them for the rest of the day ... them and Danny the Pre-teen Pervert. Don’t spoil ... speak of the devil, there’s the little brat now.”

Danny started shouting at them halfway across the dining room. Beth turned and stared pointedly out the window, refusing to even look at him.

“I got to ride the roller coaster twice. Man that ride is such a charge.” He made exaggerated motions with his hands as he collapsed into the chair next to Beth. The table rocked lightly as he continued. “I went down all the hills with my hands up. It was cool. So fun. Did you do that ride yet?”

Beth ignored him and continued to stare out the window at the throngs of people walking around the park and wished she were anywhere else but at a table in a packed restaurant listening to Danny rant. He’d actually touched her arm once in his excitement and her expression as she turned toward him grew deadly. Ice-blue eyes stared at his fingers, willing them to rot off. Slowly she brought her gaze to his. “Don’t you ever touch me again.”

Beth closed her eyes and turned back toward the window. She blinked in startled surprise when she realized Sam had caught her eye. He waved to her, smiling. Beth blinked again to rid him

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from sight, but there he stood, continuing to smile, index finger beckoning.

The waitress arrived to take their orders. Molly asked for the fried chicken basket and then it was Beth's turn.

"I'll have the hamburger platter, please." Beth handed the menu off and glanced back out the window. Sam had moved closer to the building and now stood no more than ten feet away, still summoning her.

She frowned slightly then rose from her chair and picked up her purse. "I have to go to the ladies. I'll be back in a minute."

"You want company?" Molly asked, beginning to get out of her chair.

"Nah, stay here and visit with your folks. I'll be right back."