

# Into the Fire

The Texan Quartet #4

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## DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to those who want to change the world  
for the better.



## Chapter 1

The bar was one of those hip places where the design was minimal and the prices were maximal. The tables were small to encourage intimate groups and conversations. Piper Atkinson scanned the faces in the dim lighting, hoping to catch sight of her friend, George. Stagehands were checking the microphone and equipment up front. George would be somewhere nearby, perhaps giving his client Adahy some last-minute words of encouragement.

Piper hadn't heard the singer yet, but Adahy had played at her friend Elle's café and she'd said he was fabulous. A fusion of modern music with Native American beats.

Close to the stage there was an empty table with a reserved sign on it. It was probably reserved for George.

She ordered a drink and something to eat, and stood at the bar, waiting.

"Is your daddy a baker? Because you've got a nice set of buns!" a deep male voice behind her said.

Piper rolled her eyes and debated whether to ignore the pickup line or tell the guy off, when someone grabbed her butt. She whirled and slapped at the hand. "What the hell are you doing?"

The man who'd both groped her and tried the cheesy pickup line was tall and built like a linebacker. His muscles bulged out of his too-small shirt and the glaze in his eyes told

her he'd been in the bar a while.

"Just checking out how fresh they are."

"Take a hike," she said.

Before he could respond, there was a *tap-tap* on the microphone. They both turned to the stage where one of the staff stood. He cleared his throat. "Let me introduce you to tonight's entertainment. He's a born and bred Texan – Adahy Woods."

A young man in his mid twenties walked onto the stage. He had short, dark hair and was wearing jeans and a T-shirt.

"He's a damn Indian," the linebacker said. "Didn't think they'd let that sort in a place like this."

Luckily his comments were drowned out by the applause. Disgusted, Piper grabbed her drink and moved away.

There were now two people seated at the reserved table and one of them was George. She wandered over, and George looked up and smiled. The other man didn't notice her.

"Hi, George, mind if I join you?" Piper asked.

"Sure, we've got an extra seat." George indicated one of the chairs and she put her drink on the table and pulled it out.

As she sat, the other man tore his attention away from the stage to look at her.

His gaze was intense. Chocolate brown eyes, glaring in annoyance at the interruption, chiseled features and loose, wavy, shoulder-length brown hair. Piper's whole body flushed warmly, and there was a delicious shiver down her spine.

"Tai Woods, this is Piper Atkinson, she's a friend and a reporter for the *Houston Age*." George turned to Piper. "Taima is Adahy's brother."

The name sparked something in Piper's memory. She'd just read it at work. "The chef of the Wooden Spoon."

Tai looked surprised but nodded once before turning his attention back to his brother.

Piper's editor had assigned her to do a set of profiles on people of Houston. Taima Woods was the one person on her list of interviewees she actually wanted to interview, but the reclusive chef famously didn't talk to the media. This was a great opportunity to break the ice.

"He sounds great," Piper said to George, and nodded

toward Adahy.

“He does. We’re going to release a single next month.”

The waitress delivered Piper’s order of nachos to the table.

“Help yourself,” she invited the others.

Tai frowned at her. He was obviously there for the music and not the company.

Pity even his dirty look made Piper shiver. What was wrong with her? She’d dated plenty of men, but none had given her this kind of frisson, especially not a man who was completely uninterested in her.

Still, if she was going to be interviewing him, she didn’t want to get him offside. She shut up, ate her nachos and listened to Adahy sing.

He was amazing. His tone was warm and the way he mixed Native American drums and pipes with modern pop/rock music gave it an edge, a difference that was refreshing.

Piper found herself tapping her foot to the music and when he finished his set, she added her voice to the shouts of approval coming from the crowd.

George got to his feet. “I’ll be back in a minute.” He headed to meet Adahy.

The applause died down and was replaced by voices.

“Oh my God. He’s so hot. I can’t wait to hear more of his songs,” said a woman who was sitting at the table next to theirs.

“Sounds like he was a success,” Piper commented.

Tai grunted non-committedly.

“You must be proud of him,” she tried.

“Ada’s achievements are his own.” Tai scanned the crowd.

Wow. This guy really didn’t do small talk.

Interviewing him was going to be a whole lot of fun.

She wondered whether the paper had contacted him about the special feature yet. The woman she’d phoned this evening had been expecting the call. She guessed Tai wouldn’t be.

As she was about to broach the subject, he pushed back his chair and left, walking toward Adahy and George, who were standing next to the stage.

No. Social skills really weren’t his forte.

Tai said something to his brother, gave him a hug and then wove his way through the crowd and out of the bar.

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Piper sat there, unsure whether to be amused or offended by the man's lack of manners. She decided on amused and made a mental note to ask her editor, Geraldine, why Tai was on the interview list.

George brought Adahy over to the table and introduced them.

"That was a fantastic set," Piper told him. "Let me know when you next play and I'll tell our music reporter."

"Great idea," George told her and grinned. "I'm getting drinks, do you want one?"

"Yes, please." She wasn't in any rush to get home and tomorrow was miraculously free, with no interviews booked or events she had to attend.

Adahy took the seat next to her and sighed in satisfaction. "That was fun."

Fun.

When had Piper last thought her work was fun? She couldn't remember associating that descriptor with her job at all. Even the usual positive fallbacks *interesting*, *fulfilling* and *educational* couldn't be used to describe the last few months in her new position. "You looked like you were enjoying yourself," she said.

He nodded. "You work for a paper?"

"The *Houston Age*," she told him. "I was hoping to talk to your brother about a series we've got coming up, but he left before I could."

Adahy laughed. "Good luck with that. Tai's not one for talk."

"I noticed," Piper said.

He laughed again.

George returned with the drinks and handed them out. "What brings you out tonight, Piper? No one to interrogate?"

"Not tonight. I felt like going out and Elle said you'd be here." She'd tried all of her friends – Libby, Imogen and Elle – but none of them had been available. Elle had suggested Piper meet her fiancé, George, at the bar.

"We haven't seen you much lately," George said.

Piper felt a twinge of guilt. "I'm sorry I wasn't there to help clean up after the break-in at Elle's café." Elle's ex had trashed the place in a fit of jealousy.

“We had plenty of hands,” George said. “Besides, the piece your reporter buddy did when Elle reopened the café got so many people interested that she’s constantly busy. She’s pretty happy.”

“I’m glad.” Piper had called in a favor and asked the social pages reporter to attend Elle’s bookshop café reopening. The guy had been so impressed by the setup he’d done more than a little paragraph – he had requested his editor make it the spotlight of the week.

George turned to Adahy to discuss the performance. Piper found it fascinating to listen to people talking about subjects she knew little about. Here it was all about the music – pitch and tone, notes and keys – as well as the performance itself.

Some of George’s suggestions were good and made Piper review the set in a whole other light. It wasn’t just about singing and playing: it was about entertainment. She’d like to interview George about his work, but she’d never be allowed to because the music reporter guarded her turf.

Still, she’d chat to George about it some day when they were both free.

Piper stifled a yawn and checked the time. If she wanted to do anything constructive tomorrow – and she had to do more research on those profiles – she should go to bed. She got to her feet, said goodbye and headed home.

On the way out she caught herself looking for Tai, wondering if he had indeed gone or was waiting for her to leave.

Annoyed he was on her mind when he’d not paid her the slightest bit of regard, she reminded herself it was a purely professional curiosity. She had to interview him.

She ignored the fact her body didn’t usually respond like that to people she interviewed.

It was nothing to worry about.

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Tai sat on his motorbike in his driveway and breathed in and out.

He hated reporters.

He never gave them the time of day, knowing the kind of article they would write about him. Knowing they would make

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some misinformed error about his culture, about his people.

But he shouldn't have let Piper scare him off.

He wished George hadn't invited her to join them in the first place.

Then she'd sat down and flashed him a friendly smile that reached her light hazel eyes, and shifted her head so her short honey-blond hair flicked back. It had hit him right in the chest.

She should come with a flashing red light that screamed *Danger, Danger* above her head.

Reporters couldn't be trusted.

Female reporters were the worst, because they made you think they were your friends before *bam*, they wrote some ridiculous piece about you that made no sense whatsoever. Unless you were a non-native person with no idea what life as a Native American was like.

The worst thing about Piper was that she'd been genuinely enthusiastic about Adahy's performance. She'd whooped and clapped, and he was sure she'd really liked it.

It was hard for him to dislike someone who had such good taste.

So he'd left rather than get sucked into whatever trap she was preparing for him and instead he'd spent the whole ride home fixating on her words, her hair, her curves, and her friendly, open smile.

Mountain lions looked friendly enough until they attacked.

Now he was home and still he was tense. He refused to carry the tension inside with him. Inside was his sanctuary.

So he breathed in deeply and out again before taking off his helmet and getting off his bike. He walked around his front garden, grounding himself with the touch of the tree bark, the smell of the honeysuckle, the song of the crickets.

Gradually he found his center and entered his house.

The light was on in the kitchen and heading that way he found his cousin drinking a glass of water.

"You're up late," he said.

"Your bike woke me," Rayen replied, running a hand through her long, dark hair. "When you didn't come in straight away, I was worried. What's bothering you?"

It didn't matter that she was sleepy, she knew him well

enough to know when something was wrong. Still, he didn't want to talk about it.

"Nothing." He went to the sink and poured his own glass of water.

"Didn't Adahy's performance go well?" she persisted.

"He was great," Tai told her, the pride he'd pretended not to feel with Piper welling up inside him. His little brother was going places. "George is talking about releasing a single soon."

"That's fantastic," Rayen said. "You trust George, right?"

He nodded. When Adahy had first found representation, Tai had grilled George to make sure he was on the level and that he wasn't going to cheat Adahy. George had passed muster – he continued to impress Tai with his integrity and drive.

"So what's wrong?"

"There was a reporter there."

"Ah." Rayen nodded. "What did he say?"

"*She* didn't say much. I ignored her."

Rayen rolled her eyes. "Tai, you can't judge everyone based on one experience. You'll get a reputation of being rude."

"I don't care what people think of me." He'd learned not to.

"You're lucky your reclusive behavior adds to your mystique," she said. "Sometimes I think people come to your restaurant just to catch a glimpse of you."

He grunted but didn't disagree. His restaurant was five star and popular for its food alone, but he'd lost count of the number of times his maître d' had come into the kitchen telling him a guest had requested an audience.

As if he was some kind of trained monkey.

No, he wasn't interested in the rich people who came to his restaurant. He just wanted to cook and help his people.

"I'm going to bed. I'll see you in the morning." Rayen gave him a hug and left the room.

Tai stood at the kitchen window with his glass of water, looking out over the dark yard. The thought of Piper made his chest tight again.

He'd make sure he didn't see her again.

He didn't need that.

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