

Wildfire



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*Wildfire*  
by Christyna Hunter

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*Love is the Fire of Life;  
it either consumes or purifies.*

--Anonymous

*For all my nature friends and  
friends of nature*



# Chapter One

*Duncan, Virginia*

Joanna Webb hated getting bad news.

Disappointing news was common when having to work with the red tape of all levels of bureaucracy. So when there was a victory, it was worth celebrating.

“Sorry, Jo. Senator Larken refused.”

There would be no celebrating today.

She bolted from her chair. “He gave us his word. He supported us on the Trapping Bill. Why’d he change his mind about *this* one?”

“The middle of an election year is not the time to spend extra taxpayer money.” Co-worker and friend, Mason Hunt, stood outside her open office door and frowned. His green eyes shifted from side to side behind his glasses. He leaned against the door and brushed back dark hair that was already spiked in disarray. She knew he tousled his hair when he was frustrated.

Jo blew out a breath. “You know what this means.”

“Look, we can’t give up now. There’s—”

“Damn it, Mason,” she protested, slamming her fist on the desk. “You know Senator Larken was our last chance. Without him, the bill to halt tax money on

federal land that allows game hunting is as dead as the ducks that are hunted every season.”

“We can keep trying. The vote isn’t ‘till next week,” he countered. His desperate attempt to give her—and the animals—some hope didn’t work.

Jo sighed. She sat, suddenly tired.

“I know you’ve put a lot into this. No one could’ve done any more than you did. There’s always next year.”

“Yeah, but how many more animals will die between now and then?” She would *not* cry.

“I’ll take you out for a beer after work. Getting drunk would do you a lot of good.”

For the first time since Mason’s sad announcement, Jo’s lips began to twitch upward into a small smile. “What would your wife say?”

“Are you kidding? Sissy knows you and I’ve had a passionate affair going on for years,” he joked.

“You have a real understanding wife.”

“She’ll think nothin’ of it. Meet ya at my car at six.” Mason wagged a finger at her. “Six on the dot, Missy.”

Before he completely shut the door, she saluted him. “Yes, sir!”

Her cheerful disposition left with Mason. She spun her chair around and looked out her second story window.

Another battle lost. She’d worked with Senator Larken’s people for almost a year and she thought she’d gotten through to them. She thought her presentations and statistics had changed their minds.

But it was just another battle lost.

She glanced out the window. Her eyes squinted against the April sun as it played between the swaying

limbs of a flowering dogwood. She closed her weary eyes, rubbed her aching head. The sun's toasty rays soothed.

As she relaxed, her mind drifted from this world to another.



“Papa, no!”

“Stop blubberin’! I told you to listen! But no! This’ll teach ya! Now, go! Get it! Bring it on back here. Might as well skin it, child.”

“But, Papa, there’s so much blood. I...I can’t,” wailed 11-year-old Jo. Her gaze darted from her father to the deer carcass lying a foot away. She only dared a glimpse of the dead animal. She knew the shot from her father’s rifle had slashed into this animal’s flesh and killed it. The animal had bucked, thrashed until most of its blood was shed.

She’d watched it all until it chilled her racing blood.

Staring at the lifeless body, fear and shock still in its dead eyes, Jo felt a pang nip at her heart. She could swear she felt the animal’s life drip away drop by drop.

“Look, little girl! I’m getting tired of you being a critter lover!” Joseph Webb grabbed her by the arms and dragged her over to the carcass. Pain exploded in her skull when he shoved her to the ground. As she rubbed her hands over the growing bump on her head, her eyes slowly drifted open upon the cold, ghoulish eyes of the corpse.

“No, Papa, please!” She scrambled back from the dead and decrepit, her stomach churned and threatened to upend itself. Her father sneered down at her. “We’ll

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shake the softie outta ya yet.” He jerked her trembling hands over and onto the dead animal. With her hands ensnared by her father’s, she watched as their hands wielded a knife that sliced into the creature. Shame slicked her heart, her belly. “No, Papa,” she begged again, even though it was too late. “No—”



The dream’s scream morphed into the shrill of the telephone ringing. She snapped upright in her chair. Heart hammering, she took quick, choppy breaths. Teeth clenched, her jaw ached. Her hands fisted at her sides. The warm rays begged her back from the far away field and the sour smell of fear.

After several deep, cleansing breaths, she flexed her fingers then rubbed her jaw. The phone had stopped ringing, but she hardly took notice. Deep breaths slowed her heart and steadied her breathing. It had been a long time since she’d remembered. God, why did it have to come back now?

A knock on the door only made her jump slightly this time. “Come in.”

It was Mason again. “The ten o’clock staff meeting is about to begin in Conference Room Five. Here’s the agenda.”

She glanced at it. “We’ll be discussing the IC site again?”

“Yeah. Word is that their contractor is looking over the site sometime this week. We might try some last minute negotiations, if possible. Ready?”

On firm legs now, Joanna stood and grabbed a pad of paper and pen. Shaking her head, she blocked the gruesome memory of the dream. “Ready.”



After an hour of departmental discussions, Jo returned to her office. She dropped pen and paper on her desk and flipped through her mail. Leafing through the animal advocacy magazines, a hotel bill from a recent conference in Toronto, and a variety of news wire clippings, she came to a plain, white envelope. Only the words *Whitehead, Montana* were scrawled in the return address area. Opening it, she unfolded the note and read.

*Who the hell do u think u are?  
Setting traps has been a livelihood of this  
nation for many, many of years. How  
dare you try to take away a mans right  
to earn a living!!! Trapping is an  
industree and a right of every  
American. There too many foxes and  
wolves! So many that they eat our  
cattle. u people do not even live out  
here in the country. u just try to take  
things over from your cushy chairs in  
some big-wig office building. Stick your  
noses somewhere else!*

*Signed,  
A Mad Montanan*

The headache from this morning pounded to life again.

She'd received tons of these letters before. Many times the general public didn't even try to see it The Trust's way. Or basic biology's way either. There should be a balance. There *had* to be balance.

She really didn't need this today. She was ready now for Mason's offer of a drink, but the clock told her

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the alcoholic beverage would have to wait. She decided to take a walk instead.

Jo strolled down the hall, opened the outer doors and entered heaven. She smiled at the wild geraniums that greeted her at the edge of the garden patch next to the building. Their pink petals waved in the breeze and made her smile. A Red Cardinal flew down, pecked along the ground then flew off with a twig in its tiny beak.

Her smile spread to a grin. Spring was here.

She made a mental note to check the fields behind her house for a patch of wild geraniums. Or perhaps she'd see the blue violets she'd seen last year about this time.

Childlike glee had her skipping across the parking lot to see flowering dogwoods. Their shade cooled her nerves. The dogwoods' white petals were another joyous sign of spring.

She continued down the line of flowering trees. Periodically, she stopped to inspect a fallen limb, a lush green clover, or a sprouting bud.

When she came to a *Y* in the road, she chose to continue with the line of oak trees that bordered the road. Her professional side told her to get back to work. But she told it to shut-up and continued down the hill.

From a very young age, she'd felt a connection to nature, to animals especially. When her father took her to the woods as a child, Jo would have much preferred to simply sit and watch, enjoying the sights, sounds, and smells that only nature could produce; the air cool and clean after a spring storm, the sloping meadows of buttercups. Good for taking lazy summer afternoon naps on. The crinkling of old, battered leaves under

one's feet during a stroll through the forest in the fall, the sacred silence after a winter snow storm. She thought of winter as Mother Nature taking a well-deserved nap. Then She started the cycle all over again.

Her father never saw any of that, of the beauty in nature's simple existence. Exploitation was his middle name when it came to Mother Nature. The nightmare of that morning came back to Jo, a sharp tug on her heart. Not only had her father used inhumane traps, but he and his hunting buddies went out hunting *just for fun*. No, more than fun, she realized later. More like greed. Her father simply did it to prove he could. To prove his power.

Sounds of congestion, of civilization, broke her reverie. The rush of traffic, the gas fumes, the occasional angry car horn. She realized she'd walked too close to *civilization*. Deciding to return a different way, she crossed the street to the median. She stopped and allowed a car to pass. Her gaze skipped up to the sky, azure blue, bright with scattered clouds. She shifted her gaze downward.

Then she saw him.

He stood behind a pick-up truck, the same color as the sky, with a rear bumper that gleamed in the sun. He was facing the trees she'd been about to head toward, his head slightly angled toward her, the left side of his face available for her scrutiny.

Scowling at his clipboard, the man seemed oblivious to Joanna's existence. Still standing on the median, her gaze devoured this man. Must be at least six feet tall, she mused. Thick, midnight dark hair, with a thin, gray line traced from his forehead back to his neckline. That line suddenly made her fingers itch to

run through his hair. As he flipped through the papers, his muscles twisted, shifted, rippled.

It's been too long since she'd had a date, she thought, as a vision of herself being wrapped in those arms raced into her mind.

*Too damn long!*

He wore a tidy white cotton t-shirt and a pair of tight—Oh, God, very tight—jeans. Scuffed white sneakers rounded out the ensemble.

As she finished her visual evaluation, her gaze traveled back up his body and glanced into his eyes. He'd turned to face her. Now it was his turn to look. She felt his eyes skim over her, like a dainty caress along her entire body. When he was finished, their gazes locked and a smug smile crept onto his lips.

Acute curiosity punched into sexuality, prompting her to cross the street. The stranger tossed the clipboard on the bed of the pick-up truck and leaned unhurriedly against that shiny new bumper.

"Hello," she said.

His smile spread. "Well, hello," he murmured.

Her dedicated work ethic nagged her again. The pumping sexuality that exuded from him kept her feet glued to the ground. "I was out taking a walk. Needed a break."

"You work around here?"

"Yes, up at the top of the hill, at The Trust. I mean, Animal Conservation Trust."

The smile on his face stayed in place while his right eyebrow rose. "Really?" Kiwi green. He had Kiwi green eyes that twinkled with potential mischief.

"Yeah. Do you work around here?"

He paused before he answered. Had she asked a difficult question?

“You could say that.”

“Oh?”

“I’m the project manager for Stewart and Sons. We’re going to build the newest IC building on this lot.”

Blood drained from her face, into her gut. Stewart and Sons, the construction company. The IC site. The company that The Trust, specifically Jo’s department, had been battling for two years to keep the land around its headquarters protected and safe for local wildlife.

Desire dissolved into rage. “I see,” she said as each vertebrae of her spine straightened.

“I’m here to review some of the architect’s surveys. By the way, I’m Ryan. Ryan Stewart.”

He held out a hand for her to shake. Like hell, she’d shake it. She wished her anger would melt him on the spot. To her immense disappointment, it didn’t. “Mr. Stewart, I wouldn’t shake your hand if you were the last man on earth. And I’d say it was a pleasure to meet you, but it’d be a lie. This land deserves to stay as it is. What you’re doing is disgraceful.”

The hand that hung in the air was placed back in his front jean pocket. “The courts seem to disagree with you, Ms.?”

“Webb. Jo Webb.”

“Jo?”

“Short for Joanna.”

“Ah. Well, Ms. Webb, IC and my company have the legal right now to do what we wish with the land, and we wish to build on it.”

His casual tone just fueled her anger. “It’s just a thing to you, isn’t it? Nothing more than property to shape to your own whims and desires. You bastards can never think beyond yourselves and your mile-high

egos.” As she spat out words laced with animosity, she thought perhaps she was overreacting. But considering the day she’d had—

“Would you like to have dinner with me?”

Flabbergasted, the obscenity that she was about to hurl his way caught in her throat. “Excuse me?”

This time he did move. He shifted from leaning against the pick-up to standing directly in front of her with only inches between them. She was sure the quick jump of her heart was simply a physical reaction to her rage, not keen desire as a result of watching his trim hips turn under the waistband of his jeans.

“Dinner. You know, the evening meal, usually eaten around six or seven P.M.”

“What makes you think I’d want to have dinner with you?”

“I saw your...interest when you first walked over here.”

Because he was right, she stepped back from him. “But now I know that you’re a pompous ass, so my answer is no, Mr. Stewart.”

She turned. Knowing he was watching her retreating back, she tried to keep her pace normal, steady, unaffected.

What an arrogant bastard.