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PLAYING WITH FIRE

MONTANA FIRE SERIES

Montana Fire: Summer of Fire Trilogy

Book Two: Playing with Fire

She can't forget the man she walked away from...

Liza Beaumont knew she was playing with fire when she let smokejumper Conner Young into her life. Just friends, she promised herself, but she couldn't help but fall for the tall, blond firefighter who needed her. But loving him got her burned, and she's not about to risk her heart again.

His one chance to get her back...

Conner Young knows he blew his one chance with Liza. His personal losses—and his profession—made him wary of offering any promises he couldn't be sure he'd live to keep. So he let her walk away, but he never forgot the place she'd held in his heart.

A race to find a missing girl...

Until Liza is attacked in the mountains by a rogue grizzly. Her panicked phone call alerts Conner to everything he lost—and still wants. Now, with a teenage girl missing in the woods, and a predator on the loose, Conner and Liza must fight against time and the elements to save her. But when the old friendship ignites into fresh sparks, are they setting themselves up to get burned again? And when disaster happens, will their nightmares pull them apart, or will they find the courage to survive?

Montana Fire Book Two
Playing with Fire
By
Susan May Warren

Prologue

This was not how Liza Beaumont wanted to die.

Not that anyone ever *wanted* to die, but certainly Liza could think of a dozen or more ways that would be preferable to ending up as an early-morning snack for a six-hundred-pound grizzly.

First choice might be tucked into the embrace of Conner Young, their golden years fading into a molten sunset, perhaps drifting off into sleep, to wake up in glory.

There she went again, wishing for things she didn't have. Like bear spray. Or a tranquilizer gun.

Or maybe even better than spotty cell service here, high up on a remote trail in the middle of the Cabinet Mountains in western Montana.

She glanced down the trail, back up at the bear now rocking back and forth. What had the camp wildlife expert said about bears? Stop, drop, and roll—no, no—

Drop. Play *dead*. Except her instincts, frankly, were to scream first, then—well, run.

Of course, that was *always* her instinct.

But this time it felt right, because, really, who had the courage to just lie there while a grizzly sniffed her prone body, ready to take a tasty bite out of her neck. Not when she had heaps more life to live, hopes, dreams...

Only, one of those included a six-foot-two blond smokejumper with devastating blue eyes, wide sinewed shoulders, and a body honed by the rigors of fighting fire who claimed to love sunrises as much as she did.

But Conner wasn't here. Just her, her sharpened colored graphite pencils and a fresh canvas to paint her artist's view of the sunrise. The perfect place to remind herself—and her fellow camper—that they didn't need men to live happily ever after.

Except said camper hadn't been in her bunk this morning in the high school girls' cabin.

Esther, where are you?

Clearly not here on the overlook.

Liza could hardly believe it when she'd woken this morning to the sight of Esther's rumpled, empty sleeping bag. She'd torn herself out of bed, grabbed coffee from the lodge, and—with the hope that Esther Rogers was already at the overlook, armed with her own sketch pencils, furiously sketching the arch of a new day—Liza had set out to find her.

Remind her that hiking out from camp without her counselor was a colossal no-no, even at Camp Blue Sky, and especially during the annual Ember Community Church family camp.

Even if the poor girl might be nursing a breakup.

Liza could murder heart-breaker Shep Billings with her bare hands. Or at least wound him with a graphite pencil.

Although, in her gut, Liza had a feeling Esther might have dreamed up Shep's attention toward her. The hot boys simply didn't date artsy, introverted, slightly chubby book nerds with plain dark brown hair like Liza—*er*—Esther.

So, when Liza found the fifteen-year-old holed up last night, face puffy, surrounded in wadded tissues, an early morning, brain-clearing hike up to the Snowshoe Peak overlook to watch the sunrise over the hoary peaks seemed like something a savvy counselor might suggest.

Even as Liza hiked up to the overlook, the sunrise promised inspiration, clouds mottled with lavender and crimson, and gilded with the finest threads of gold feathered the heavens. A breeze tickled the aspen along the trail, the piney scent from the valley redolent with the heady sense of summer and freedom and fresh starts.

The air suggested another scorcher, dust and tinder-dry yellow needles kicked up on the path, settling onto her boots. Three weeks into her stay at Camp Blue Sky and already she'd seen two fires thicken the air above the Kootenai National Forest.

Most likely, the blond smokejumper was fighting some Glacier Park fire, sooty from head to toe, reeking of sweat and ash and wrung out from a week on the fire line.

At least that was how Conner most often came to her in her dreams.

And there she went again, conjuring him up, as if he might swagger into her life, carrying a donut, a cup of coffee, and that languid smile that made her heart lie to her.

Enough.

The overlook hung over a ledge in the Pine Ridge trail, ten feet of cut-away granite edged with a cowboy split-rail fence for a modicum of protection from the two-hundred-foot drop. Further up, the trail banked around the edge of mountain, the land falling more gently into a valley until it tumbled into the north fork of the Bull River.

A roughhewn bench, smoothed out by early morning enthusiasts, perched in the middle of the overlook.

Liza had dearly hoped to spot Esther, with her mousy brown hair held back with a blue bandanna, dressed in her freshly tie-dyed shirt and grubby jeans, seated and drawing the dawnscapes.

Empty. “Esther?”

Liza’s voice had echoed in the blue-gold of the morning, scattering the shadows that bled through the trees.

Nothing but the shift of the wind in the trees, the scolding of a wood thrush.

Huh.

So maybe Esther hadn’t broken the rules. Which meant she was still back at camp, maybe having gotten up early to use the showers. Although Liza had stopped there, too, on her way, and nothing but a few spiders rustled around the long building in the silvery predawn hours. All seventy-five family campers still tucked soundly in their beds.

Except, of course, Esther.

Liza had stood there, finishing off her coffee, debating.

Now that she was here, she could settle down, take out her board, and start a fresh sketch. Or—probably she should head back to camp, just to make sure Esther wasn’t really holed up in the chapel, still weeping. Or maybe in the mess hall, loading up on Captain Crunch.

Yeah, she knew teenage girls. Especially the ones who wore their hearts pinned to their sleeves, bait for the first wily teenage boy to take a whack at it.

But that’s why they’d hired her—not only to teach art but because she knew the kind of trouble teenagers could conjure up, both real and imagined. And she might not have all the answers, but she had a desire to keep life from feeling so big they gave into the urge to run.

Maybe someday, too, she could teach herself that same trick.

Liza had walked to the edge of the cliff, breathed in the ethereal impulse to open her arms, take flight. To soar, caught on the currents rising from the valley. To escape the weight of the aloneness that sometimes took her breath away.

“I love the sunrise. It’s Lamentations 3:22 over and over—”

Memories of Conner, lurking in her brain again.

Wow, she missed him, his absence a burning hole in her chest that she probably deserved.

She should have realized that Conner Young simply hadn't been that into her.

Which made her exactly the right candidate to counsel poor Esther. Liza had turned to leave when her gaze caught on something neon blue.

In that second, Liza's heart turned to stone.

A Blue Sky camp jacket. Caught in a gnarled cedar clinging to the rocky edge, as if—blown? Snagged on a fall?

Her breath hiccupped, turned to ash as she peered over the edge—*please, God, no*. Pebbles and the slick loam of old needles and runoff littered the ground of the overlook—easy to slip on should someone lose their footing.

But she saw nothing—no broken branches from the black spruce below, no tumble of boulders evidencing an avalanche.

No broken body of a fifteen-year-old girl crumpled at the base of the cliff.

Liza couldn't help it. She leaned over the edge. "Esther!" Her voice rippled in the air, too much panic in it to deny.

She closed her eyes, listened.

Maybe the jacket didn't belong to Esther. Maybe days ago a camper had shucked it off, left it here. The greedy wind scooped it up, flung it over the cliff, maybe—

It was then that the huffing sound behind her made her stiffen. The wind raked up a smell, earthy, rank, the scent of beast.

Liza held her breath, turned.

Oh—no—

Standing at the head of the trail, forty feet away, his dark eyes rimmed by a ruff of matted brown fur, powerful forearms pawing grooves into the dirt, head swinging—

Grizzly.

Her brain formed around the word even as she moved back against the rail. Glanced down.

Suddenly, the jacket made terrible, gut-wrenching sense.

The bear reared up, pawing at the air.

And sorry, she hadn't a prayer of playing dead with the scream roiling up inside her.

Oh, God, please make me fast.

If she lived, maybe He'd give her the courage to rewind time, past the last thirty minutes, or last night, all the way to last year, to the moment when she'd run away from Conner Young.

And this time she'd stay.

Get Playing with FIRE!

