



Heart of Fire

By Linda Howard

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He's fast. She's furious. They're in for the ride of their lives.

Rising star Roxanne St. Claire puts the pedal to the metal in a story of intrigue and passion that will get your heart racing!

When sexy NASCAR racer Beau Lansing tracks down high society debutante Celeste Bennett, it's a matter of life or death. Stunned at the secret Beau reveals, Celeste is forced to make a life-altering decision. But with her love life on the skids and her family life in a tailspin, escaping incognito into Beau's world is just what she needs -- especially if she can get answers about her past.

Beau needs Celeste to save a man's life -- he never expected a high-octane attraction that could wreck his well-protected heart. And when Celeste's life is threatened by someone who clearly knows her real identity, Beau has to risk everything -- including his own life -- to save her. With menacing forces in the driver's seat and time ticking too fast, the two must win the biggest race of all...the race for their lives and their love.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Archeologist Jillian Sherwood attributes her lackluster professional reputation to the fact that her late father, also an archeologist, was notorious for his supposedly crackpot theories, such as one about a lost city in the heart of the Amazon jungle that was home to a band of Amazon women warriors. Equipped with a map from her father's papers, Jillian is determined to find the lost city, thereby salvaging her father's reputation and her own. She is accompanied on the two-month expedition by Rick, her half-brother, who still resents her being daddy's favorite; Steven Kates, an unprincipled crook who has money to fund the venture and plans to steal anything valuable that turns up; Ramon Dutra, a jungle-wise thug; and Ben Lewis, an experienced guide who is more macho than any human being needs to be. Unfortunately, the more intense their adventures, the less realistic they appear because the characters have charmed lives. A pirate attack, an encounter with a jaguar and a hazardous walk along the side of a mountain give Howard's (*The Touch of Fire*) romance an adventure-yarn feel, but since Jillian seems to be virtually indestructible and Ben, as her only possible love interest, is inevitably guaranteed survival, the book lacks real suspense.

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About the Author

Linda Howard is an award-winning author whose novels include the recent *New York Times* bestsellers *Shadow Woman*, *Up Close and Dangerous*, and *Drop Dead Gorgeous*, as well as the Pocket Books releases *Kill and Tell*, *Now You See Her*, *All the Queen's Men*, *Mr. Perfect*, and *Open Season*. She lives in Alabama with her husband and two golden retrievers.

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From "Heart of Fire"

Jillian Sherwood was tight-lipped with anger as she let herself into her condo. It was less than two years old, and she usually felt a surge of pleasure and achievement on stepping over the threshold, for the condo wasn't only great looking, it was *hers*, but today wasn't a usual day and she didn't even notice the cool, soothing interior. She slung her canvas bag onto the foyer table and stalked straight through the living room to the balcony. Her anger was so overwhelming that she felt as if she had to be outside so it could expand.

She stood rigidly still in the late spring heat of Los Angeles, her hands braced on the rim of the waist-high concrete wall. She had a good view of the city, and normally she loved it, both the pastels of daytime and the glowing neons of night, but she was too angry right then to even see it.

Damn those narrow-minded bastards!

She had paid her dues, earned the fight to work on the Ousalla dig in east Africa; it was the biggest new archaeological find in decades, and her mouth literally watered at the thought of being involved. She had never wanted anything as much as she wanted to help excavate the buried ancient village that had only recently been discovered on the African coast of the Red Sea. The dig was being funded by the Frost Archaeological Foundation, the very foundation she worked for, and she had been almost giddy with excitement when she submitted her name for consideration for the team being chosen to work on the Ousalla site.

Why shouldn't she have expected to be chosen? Her work was excellent, and so were her reports; her papers

had been printed in several reputable publications. She had a doctorate in archaeology and had already been on several minor digs in Africa; her experience would be of considerable value to a dig as important as the one at Ouosalla. Only the best would be chosen, but she knew that she was one of the best. She was experienced, dedicated and hardworking, and possessed the kind of nimble, commonsense mind that allowed archaeologists to piece together ancient lives from the fragments left behind. There was no reason why she wouldn't be chosen.

But she hadn't been, because to the pinheads who ran the foundation, there was one very good reason not to include her: her name was Sherwood.

The head of archaeology at the university had put it to her point-blank: The daughter of Cyrus "Crackpot" Sherwood wouldn't be a prestigious addition to any archaeological team. Her own work and reliability were overshadowed by her father's reputation for propounding wild theories.

She was beating her head against a wall and it infuriated her. Her father had always said that she had enough determination for three people, but in this instance she was frustrated by a lack of options. She didn't want to leave the field of archaeology; she loved it too much. But the upper levels of her chosen career were closed to her, because of who she was. Archaeological digs cost a lot of money, and there weren't many sponsors around; the competition for the available funds was murderous. Therefore no reputable team could afford to send her on a major dig, as her very presence would call into question the validity of the findings, and the team would then lose the funding.

Even changing her name wouldn't do any good; the world of archaeology was a small one and too many people knew her. If only it weren't all so political. The funding went to the big names that got the publicity, and no one would take the chance of getting bad press by including her. She had been on plenty of minor digs, but all of the important finds had been closed to her.

Not that she would have changed her name, even if it would have done any good. Her father had been a wonderful man and a brilliant archaeologist. She had dearly loved him, and still missed him even though he had been dead for half of her twenty-eight years. It infuriated her that his many contributions to archaeology had been virtually ignored because of his wilder schemes and theories, none of which he had been able to prove. He had died in an accident in the Amazon jungle while on a trek that he'd hoped would provide incontrovertible proof of one of his more outrageous theories. He had been called a charlatan and a fool, but after his death the more sympathetic had decided that he had merely been "misguided."

Cyrus Sherwood's reputation had followed Jillian throughout her college days and her career, so she had often felt as if she had to work harder than anyone else, to be more accurate, more conscientious, to never show any of the flights of fancy that her father had reveled in. She had devoted herself to archaeology, never even taking a vacation, using every possible moment to pursue her goals.

All for nothing.

"Crackpot" Sherwood's daughter wasn't welcome on any major digs.

She banged her hands down on the wall. He hadn't been a crackpot, she thought fiercely. He had been a little vague, a little off-key, but a marvelous father, when he was home, and a damn good archaeologist.

Thinking of him made Jillian remember the boxes of his papers that she had never gone through. After his death, Professor Sherwood's papers had been packed up and the house sold, and her half brother, Rick, had

taken the boxes to his dingy apartment and simply stacked them in a corner. He had no interest in them, and as far as she knew, they had never been touched. When Jillian finished college and moved into her own place she had offered to take them, to get them out of his way, but Rick had refused -- more, she thought, because he liked the idea of having something that she wanted than because he himself wanted their father's things.

In that, as in most things, Rick's reasoning had been faulty. Though she would never have destroyed her father's papers, she hadn't been panting to get at them. Quite the contrary. By then, Jillian had been forced to full, painful acknowledgment of her father's reputation as a crackpot, a joke in the profession, and she hadn't wanted to read anything that might make her believe it, too. Better to keep her memories of him as they were.

But now she felt a surge of curiosity and a need to bring his memory closer. He had *not* been a crackpot! Some of his theories were unconventional, but five hundred years ago the theory that the earth was round was also considered a crackpot idea. Her father had spent countless hours poring over maps, charts, and journals, tracking down clues, to help formulate theories. And in the field he had been superb, able to tell so much about the past by the few shards of evidence that had survived to the present day.

She wished she had those boxes right now. Her father had never given her anything but support, and she needed that. He was gone, but those old records were more a part of him than the few mementos, mostly photographs, that she had.

She wavered for a minute. This was the blackest moment of her career, the angriest and saddest she had been since she had learned of the professor's death. She was independent by nature, but even the most independent person sometimes needed comfort, and this was one of those times for her. She wanted to feel closer to her father, needed to refresh her memories of him.

Making up her mind, she moved briskly back inside and looked up Rick's number in her address book, thinking wryly that it was an accurate comment on their relationship that she didn't know it. In essence, there was no relationship between them in any emotional sense. He had borrowed money from her a couple of times, but on average she saw him maybe once a year, which was plenty for both of them.

She let the phone ring for an entire minute before hanging up. Always realistic, she knew that it might take her a couple of days to get in touch with him, so she controlled her impatience and changed into her gym clothes. A workout was always good for stress, and she liked staying in shape anyway. Visits to the gym three days a week, plus jogging, kept her fit.

Still, as soon as she returned home a couple of hours later, she picked up the telephone and hit the redial button. To her surprise, after the first ring there was a click as the receiver was lifted and a brusque, only slightly slurred "Yeah?" barked into her ear.

"Rick, it's Jillian. Are you going to be home tonight?"

"Why?" The second word was guarded, suspicious.

"I want to look through those boxes of Dad's old papers."

"What for?"

"Just to look through them. We never have, you know. We don't know what's in there."

"So what does it matter now?"

"I don't guess it does. I'm just curious." Instinctively she didn't let Rick know how much she hurt inside or how she needed that contact with their father.

"I don't have time to sit here and watch you trip down memory lane," he said, totally bypassing the possibility of letting her pick up the boxes and carry them home with her. Rick would never give up what he perceived as an advantage over her.

"Okay," she said. "Forget it. It was just an idea. Bye."

"Wait," he said hurriedly. She could almost feel him thinking, picture the idea forming in his mind. "Uh...I guess you can come over. And, uh, do you think you can spare some cash? I'm a little short."

"Well, I don't know," she said, not wanting him to think it had been too easy and maybe change his mind. "How much cash?"

"Not much. Maybe a hundred."

"A hundred!"

"Okay, okay, make it fifty."

"I don't know," she said again. "I'll see what I have."

"Are you coming over now?" he asked.

"Sure, if you're going to be there."

"I'll be here." He dropped the phone, crashing it in her ear. Jillian shrugged as she hung up. Every contact with Rick was like that. Sometimes she wondered if he would ever see the futility of trying to spite her.

She checked her wallet to make sure she had fifty dollars in cash; she did, but it would wipe her out until she could get to an automatic teller, something she didn't like to do at night. She had plenty of gas in her car, though, so she wouldn't need cash for anything that night. It was worth fifty bucks to her to be able to go through her father's papers right away, when she needed bolstering. She seldom did, being solidly planted on her own two feet, but sometimes even the most resilient plant wilted. Tonight her leaves were definitely drooping.

She didn't bother changing out of her sweats because she was certain it would be a dusty, dirty job, sorting through those boxes after all these years. It took her forty-five minutes to reach Rick's apartment complex. It was a trio of two-story buildings, the stucco painted a pale salmon that had probably looked fresh lo, those many years ago when the complex was new but now was stained and faded to an unappetizing pinkish tan. Rick lived in the building on the left, on the bottom floor. The parking lot was crowded with vehicles in various stages of disassembly. Those that did presumably run were mostly in need of bodywork or were evidently in the process of getting it, since the main color was paint primer. The apartment occupants were in much the same shape, except for the paint.

She knocked on Rick's door. She could hear the television, but nothing else. She knocked again.

"All right, all right," came a faint, disgruntled answer, and a minute later Rick opened the door.

She was always surprised by how pleasant and boyish Rick's features were, how well his face had resisted the effects of cigarettes, booze, and his general life-style. His looks were fading a bit now, finally being worn down, but he was still an attractive man.

"Hi," he said. "You bring the money?"

"I don't have much more than fifty, but I can get by if you need it," she said, while thinking, *Hello, I'm fine, how are you?* She could smell the alcohol on his breath. Rick wasn't much for manners when he was sober, but he had none at all when he was drinking. Unfortunately, that was most of the time.

"Sure, I need it," he snapped. "I wouldn't have asked for a hundred to begin with if I didn't need it."

She shrugged and took out her wallet, opening it so he could see that she was giving him every bill she had. Fifty-seven bucks. She would never see it again, but she didn't expect to. She gave him the money and said, "Where are the boxes?"

"Back there. In the other bedroom."

The second bedroom was a junk room, without any hint of ever having seen a bed. Rick used it for storage and, evidently, as a convenient place for tossing anything that got in his way, including dirty clothes. The boxes were stacked in a corner; she fought her way over to them and began clearing out a space so she would have room to unpack them.

"What're you looking for?" Rick asked. She heard the suspicion in his voice and knew he hadn't quite believed her before.

"Nothing. I just want to read them. Why don't you bring in a couple of chairs and go through them with me?"

"No, thanks," he said, giving her a "get real" look. "I'd rather sip a cold one and watch the tube."

"Okay," she said, reaching for the first of the boxes; there were five of them, water-stained and fittingly coated with dust since most of the things the professor had loved had been dusty. She sat down on the floor and began tearing off the brown masking tape that had been used to seal them shut.

A lot of the material was research books, which she arranged around her according to subject. Some of the books, she noted with interest, were rare editions, which she handled with appreciative care.

There were notes about various digs, articles he had thought interesting and saved, maps and charts of varying ages, and several spiral notebooks in which he'd recorded his own ideas. These she opened with a smile tugging at her lips, for in the cramped handwriting she found again the essence of her father. He had had such enthusiasm for his work, such a boundless joy in reconstructing lost civilizations. He had never tried to rein in his imagination but had let it flow, trusting that it would take him toward the truth, which to him had always been much more fantastic than the most clever of lies.

His zest for his work had led him to try to track down several legends, and he had accorded each one a chapter in his notebooks. Jillian remembered the many evenings she had spent as a child, sitting enthralled at his feet or in his lap while he spun his wondrous tales for her entertainment. She hadn't grown up on fairy

tales, though in a way perhaps she had, but her fairy tales had been of ancient civilizations and treasures, mysteriously vanished....Had they ever really existed, or were they exactly that, tales grounded only in man's imagination? For her father, even the faintest glimmer of possibility that they could be true had been irresistible; he had had to track down the smallest of threads, if only to satisfy his own curiosity.

She skimmed the notebooks, her eyes dreamy as she remembered the tales he had told her associated with each legend, but she noted that he had discounted most of the legends as myth, with no factual basis. Some few legends he had decided were at least possible, though further research was needed and the truth would probably never be known. She became furious all over again; how could anyone dismiss him as a crackpot, when the evidence was right here that he had weighed the facts very carefully and wasn't influenced by the glamour or mythic proportions of his targets. But all anyone had ever talked about was his Anzar theory, his spectacular failure, and how his pursuit of it had cost him his life.

The Anzar. She hadn't thought about the legend for a long time, because it had caused his death. He had been so excited about it. The last time she had seen him, that morning before he left to travel to the Amazon in pursuit of the Anzar legend, he had been so exuberant, so enthusiastic. She had been a thin, awkward thirteen-year-old girl, almost fourteen, sulky at being left behind, pouting because he would be gone during her birthday, but he had hugged and kissed her anyway.

"Don't pout, sweetheart," he had said, stroking her hair. "I'll be back in a few months, half a year at the most."

"You don't have to go," she had replied, unrelenting.

"But I have this chance to find the Empress, to prove that the Anzar existed. You know what that would mean, don't you?"

At thirteen she had already had an alarmingly realistic outlook on life. "Tenure," she had said, and he had laughed.

"Well, that too. But think of what it would be like to prove the legend true, to hold the Heart of the Empress in my hand, to give its beauty to the world."

She had scowled. "You'd better be careful," she had scolded, shaking her finger at him. "The Amazon isn't a cakewalk, you know."

"I know. I'll watch every step, I promise."

But he hadn't. That morning was the last time she had seen him. They got the news about three months later, and it took another two months before his body was retrieved and returned for burial. Great-Aunt Ruby had come to stay with Jillian while the professor was gone, so Jillian's schooling wouldn't be interrupted, but after his death the house was abruptly sold and she found herself permanently installed in Great-Aunt Ruby's tiny bungalow. Rick, though he was her closest relative, hadn't wanted to burden himself with an adolescent girl. Besides, Rick had never forgiven his father for remarrying after the death of Rick's own mother, and he had moved out as soon as he finished high school. Rick and Jillian had never been close; he had barely tolerated her. The situation had never improved.

Her father's pursuit of the Anzar legend had ended his life and totally changed hers, not just in losing her father but in uprooting her from everything she had known, and even in the present his last quest

overshadowed her own career. She flipped through the notebook, wanting to see his most personal thoughts about the legend that had cost her so much, but there wasn't a chapter devoted to the Anzar. She laid the notebook aside and picked up another, but it didn't contain anything about that ancient tribe either.

She went through two more notebooks before she found it, lying under the third notebook, which she had just picked up. It was plainly labeled on the front of the notebook in a heavy black script: *The South American Anzar Civilization*. It alone, of all the legends he had investigated, rated a notebook by itself. A thrill of excitement went through her as she lifted it out of the box and carefully opened it, wondering if she would be able to see what had so captured his interest that he had risked his reputation and his life to pursue it, and lost both.

He had collected several fables and legends from various sources, she saw, all of which contained some reference to the Empress or the Queen's Heart. The origins of these fables were impossible to pin down, though Cyrus Sherwood had meticulously researched them. They were neither Incan nor Mayan, yet seemed to originate from some advanced civilization. The fables had also referred to "the city of stone under the sea of green, the land of the Anzar." In several versions of the fable, with minor variations, a great warrior queen fell in love with a fierce warrior from another tribe, but he was killed while defending the city of stone, and his warrior queen, from a tribe of bloodless winged demons. The warrior queen, or empress, was devastated by his death and swore on his body that her heart would never belong to another, in this life or the next, through all eternity. She lived to a great old age, and when she died, her heart turned into a red jewel, which was taken from her body and placed on the tomb of her beloved warrior so it would belong to him through all eternity, just as she had pledged. Supposedly the red jewel had magical powers; it cast a spell of protection over the Anzar that kept them forever hidden in their city of stone under the green sea. It was the sort of tale that had sprung up in endless variations all over the world, with nothing to set it apart that would explain Professor Sherwood's intense interest in it.

Or her own. Jillian sat back on her heels, staring at the notebook. Her heart was pounding, and she didn't know why, unless it was because her father had thought this legend important enough to devote a separate notebook to it. She felt tense, caught up in the almost painful anticipation that still colored his words fifteen years later. She began reading again.

Almost an hour later she found the code. She stared at it, the childhood memory clicking into place. She grabbed her purse, scrawled around for a pencil, and began transcribing the code. Only a few words into it, she folded the paper and crammed it into her purse, not wanting to go any further until she could do it in private.

No wonder he had been so excited.

She was sweating, her pulse racing. Her heart was slamming against her rib cage, and it was all she could do to keep from lifting her head in a primal scream to release the tension that had built within her.

He had done it. She knew it as she had never known anything else in her life, with a bone-deep conviction. Her father had found the Anzar.

And so, by God, would she.

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Users Review

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