



ONE

A PORTER CASSEL MYSTERY

CARELESS

MOMENT

DAVE HUGELSCHAFFER

Author of *DAY INTO NIGHT*

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I'M RIDING WITH BB the King — not the blues legend, but a guy of considerable talent. Last night at camp he took sixty dollars from me in a card game, saying it would ease his retirement. I can understand his concern — at well past fifty, Bert Brashaw is one of the oldest firefighters I've worked with. If I sit at the card table with him many more nights, I'll go home to Canada poorer than when I arrived.

"Take a right up ahead," he says, pointing. "But watch that curve."

Brashaw is local, the supervisor of a district hotshot crew, and knows the road. I take his advice, braking gently, and we hit the curve at a reasonable speed. Too late, I see washboard and the 4x4 dances sideways, clanging hand tools. I swear and brake harder. Brashaw has a hand on the dash to steady himself, the other on the brim of his hard hat. "Maybe I should drive," he says.

"Everyone's a critic."

"Do they have drivers' licences up north?"

"No," I tell him, jamming the shifter into a higher gear. "Buckle up sweetheart."

Brashaw looks for something else to hang onto. He's a big guy, fully occupying his half of the front seat. On this rough road, his folds and chins jiggle, but there's a lot of muscle underneath. At camp, he was loading cubies — five-gallon water jugs — like they were softballs. We pull out of the curve and I glance in the side-view mirror. Barely visible in a plume of dust behind us, the crew bus rounds the corner. Farther

back is the rest of the convoy; two fire engines and a D7 dozer on a lowboy. We may move slow, but we're armed to the teeth.

"Cassel, this is Missoula Dispatch. What is your present location?"

I reach for the radio, give BB a questioning look. "Blood Creek Road," he says.

"Missoula Dispatch — we're approaching the Blood Creek Road."

There's a pause, then Dispatch gives us an update. "Revised location is nine miles northeast of a sharp bend in the Blood Creek Road — you should see the smoke pretty soon. Eight smokejumpers have been dispatched and are currently en route to the fire. This will be Incident 47. Upon arrival, you are to assume control as the incident commander."

"Copy that Dispatch. Any word on fire behaviour?"

Another pause. The dispatcher still has the radio keyed; other voices can be heard in the background, cutting in over each other. It sounds busy. The dispatcher says something clearly not intended for us, then we're told to stand by. Up ahead the road forks, and a small brown sign points the way to Blood Creek. We rattle over more washboard, then start uphill on a steep, winding grade. The trees — big ponderosa thick with fir understory — are so close to the edge of the road it seems the forest might slap together like a giant vise, trapping us.

I hope the fire isn't burning in the same type of fuel.

"Cassel, this is Missoula Dispatch. Jumpers are at location and report the fire is about thirty acres, burning in a canyon. Moderate rate of spread. Surface fire with some candling. Winds steady from the east at three miles per hour."

"What about access?"

"There's a narrow bush road. Sounds pretty steep, but you might make it."

"Copy that Dispatch." I hang the radio mike in its bracket below the dash, look over at Brashaw. He's got a map out and is frowning. "You know that area?"

“Yeah,” he says, staring at the map.

“Rough country?”

He looks over at me, his normally jovial face pensive. “You could say that.”

I glance at the map, looking for contour lines, roads — anything that might give me a clue as to where we’re going and what we’re going to be up against when we get there. But the map is a fuzzy photocopy and the road ahead is a bit distracting; I yank the truck off a collision course with a massive ponderosa.

“What kind of slopes are we talking about?” I ask Brashaw. “Can we use the dozer?”

Brashaw looks at me a moment longer, as if deciding whether to answer. He gazes ahead, and with a beefy hand wipes sweat from his brow. “From what they said, I think it’s burning in Holder’s Canyon.”

I wait for more. Brashaw fidgets, building the suspense.

“Okay,” I say finally. “What’s so special about Holder’s Canyon?”

“Well ... forget it.” He folds the map, tucks it into the pocket of his yellow fire shirt.

“Forget what? You haven’t told me anything. What kind of country is it?”

“It’s rugged,” he says. “Pretty inaccessible.”

For a few minutes we drive without talking, listening to short bursts from the radio — smokejumpers talking to one another, checking in, regrouping after touching down. Mixed in are other conversations, from other fires. In this line of work, everyone gets a turn at burning up. This year it’s the Pacific Northwest; Montana and Oregon are getting hit pretty hard. That’s why I’m here, on loan from Alberta through the MARS — Mutual Aid Resource Sharing — agreement, a wonderful example of cross-border co-operation allowing firefighters to make a little overtime when it’s raining back home. So far, I’ve done pretty well: nearly two weeks on a fire farther south; then, this afternoon, as I’m waiting for orders, this one pops up. And it’s all mine.

“So tell me more about Holder’s Canyon.”

Brashaw lifts his hard hat and scratches his head, plops his lid back on and gazes out the side window. Green branches ripple past. “It’s nothing you really need to know,” he says.

He’s playing me just right — now I have to know. “Tell me anyway.”

“Okay,” he murmurs. But he takes his time. He takes the map out of his shirt pocket, unfolds it and stares at it until I’m just about to say something, then folds it again and places it in the glove compartment. At this rate, the fire will be out by the time he tells me. “You gotta keep an open mind,” he says.

“Open as a dumpster.”

“Well ...” He shifts, looks uncomfortable. “That canyon has a reputation around here.”

“Vampires?” I say, gearing down for a steep climb.

“People who go in never come out.”

For a minute, neither of us say anything. The transfer case on the truck whines and I glance in the mirror to see if the fire engines are on the slope yet, but they’re hidden by a curve in the road. They’re going to have a bitch of a time getting up here. Brashaw isn’t going to have it much easier getting me to believe the campfire tale he’s spinning. At least, I’m pretty sure that’s what it is — have a little fun, intimidate the new guy.

“So what happens to them?” I ask. I can play right along.

“They die,” he says solemnly.

I wait, but he’s not very forthcoming, which gives me an eerie chill. I’ve sat around a lot of campfires, heard a lot of tall tales, but most guys don’t have Brashaw’s sense of pacing. Between bends in the road, I glance over at him to see if he’s smiling. We pull another steep grade, the steepest yet, then round a sharp corner. There’s a trail forking to the left, just a set of brown dirt tracks with grass growing between them. Brashaw lifts a heavy arm. “Up there.”

I slow to a crawl to make the turn, stopping just long enough to ensure the crew bus sees where we’re going, then gear up. The trail is so narrow the side-view mirrors are knocked out of alignment. The

forest closes in. Dense shadow. A scent of fir so strong it's nauseating. I'm about to prompt Brashaw again — we'll be at the fire soon and I want to hear the end of this little fable before we get there — but he starts on his own.

"There used to be a hunting camp a few miles south of the canyon, run by an outfitter from town. Most of his customers were out-of-state. Big shots who wanted a bear rug by the fire and a story they could use to impress their buddies back home. First thing the outfitter would tell them was they could hunt anywhere but the canyon, that it was cursed, and they generally stayed away — the canyon is so damn rugged no one wanted to bushwhack through there anyway. Until three hunters decide they have to check it out. The outfitter tried to talk them out of it." Brashaw pauses, gives me a wry smile. "But the customer is always right."

"Naturally."

"Well, they went in — by themselves. The outfitter didn't want anything to do with it. Two days later, he's getting worried. The hunters aren't back yet, and they haven't squared the bill with him. He waits another day, just to be sure they won't come back on their own, then jacks up his courage and goes after them. Wanna guess what he found?"

"Three zombies with their hearts ripped out?"

Brashaw is unflappable. "They were all dead," he says seriously. "Right next to the creek, shot through the heart. When the ballistics came back, they found three different slugs from three different rifles, all owned by the hunters. Seems they'd shot each other." He watches me, frowning in a challenging sort of way. "No one could figure out how they'd managed to do that."

I can think of a few scenarios, but maybe I'm just more creative.

The radio blares: Dispatch wanting an update. How close are we to the fire? Can we see it yet? I soothe her by saying we're five minutes back.

"So that's it?" I say to Brashaw. "A few hunters got shot?"

Brashaw looks mildly offended, scowling at the floorboards and shifting in his seat. But he rises to the occasion. "You think I'm making

this up? Well, I'll tell you a little bit more about this canyon, although it might not help your peace of mind when you're in there. The canyon is named after Alister Holder. Holder was a miner back in the thirties who had a claim up there. One spring, he doesn't come to town like usual, for supplies, and the clerk at the store starts to get worried. After he's waited what he figures is a reasonable amount of time, he talks to the sheriff, and the sheriff saddles up and goes looking for Holder." Brashaw shakes his head, as though he might have known Holder personally. "They checked his shack and his workings along the creek, but he was nowhere to be found. Story is, the sheriff found him by accident on his trip out. There was blood on some of the branches along the trail, and when the sheriff looked up to see where the blood was coming from, he found Holder — up in a tree, like he was trying to get away from something. Dead as a post. When they got him down, they discovered that he'd cut his wrists."

I nod, impressed. A few holes, but not a bad story.

"Three weeks later, the sheriff had a heart attack."

"So the place is haunted?"

Brashaw nods. "I guess. They say it's the avenging spirit of the Indians."

There's a long uphill pull; the trail has turned to twin eroded gullies and I drift as far to one side as possible to avoid bottoming out. We're in another gully. Trees rise majestically on either side. At the top of the slope, the road levels and smoke hangs in gauzy suspension like early morning fog. Sunlight, sliced by the trees, projects ethereal beams through the haze. Ghosts don't seem entirely unrealistic. I stop the truck and get out, watch the progress of the convoy, worried they might not all make the hill. Below, the crew bus bounces over ruts. Behind them, fire engines labour forward in low gear. While I'm waiting I peer ahead, searching for the source of the smoke, but the forest is too dense and the fire remains hidden.

"Nothing like the smell of burning pine to get your blood roiling," says Brashaw. He's facing away from me, hunched, adding his contribution to the gully erosion.

“So why do they call you BB the King?” I ask.

He chuckles, zipping up. “State secret.”

“I’ll figure it out,” I tell him as we climb into the truck again.

The road rises over the toe of a long ridge and suddenly we’re at the fire. Dense white smoke rises in a slanting column from a steep valley. Judging from the width of the column at its base, I’d say the fire is pretty close in size to the jumpers’ estimate. The whiteness of the smoke is a good sign — the fire is lying fairly low, not doing anything too crazy. But it’s still early in the day and burning conditions are bound to worsen.

“This is going to be a bitch to get into,” says Brashaw, leaning forward, a hand on the dash.

He isn’t kidding. The canyon rises up the side of a rugged mountain, solidly carpeted with dense fir and brush — a smorgasbord of fuel for the fledgling fire. The north side of the canyon is a sharp, bony ridge, bisected by lesser gullies and ridges clogged with brush and deadfall. On the south flank, another ridge has been shorn away, leaving a high cliff. “We’ll have to flank it,” I say. “Create a safety zone at the tail and anchor from there.”

Brashaw nods, chewing his lower lip.

I call Missoula Dispatch to let them know we’ve arrived, but get a broken response, the radio cutting in and out. Most of the message is garbled — too many ridges between us and them — and I relay through Kershaw Lookout, a local fire tower. After briefing Dispatch about what I see and how I plan to proceed, I request two more dozers for heavy line construction, another shot crew, and a helicopter. Dispatch confirms my order and tells me to stand by. While I’m waiting, I call the smokejumpers. The response I get is a little breathless.

“Cassel, this is Sue Galloway, smokejumper in charge. Welcome to Incident 47.”

“Glad to be here. Where are you and what is the fire doing?”

“We’re on the south flank, working our way toward the tail.” Galloway’s voice wavers, like she’s walking on uneven ground. The pop

and crackle of fire comes through like static. “We jumped into a bare area on the top of a ridge. It’s pretty much a cliff from there on down, so it took us a while to get to the fire. It’s candling quite a bit, but dropping down after a few trees go up. Lots of potential though, with this much understory. We get any more wind and it’ll stay in the crowns.”

There’s a pause and I ask what action they’ve taken.

“Not much we can do with hand tools in this type of bush, so I started flagging a dozerline from the base of the cliff. I take it you’re the new IC, so what do you want us to do?”

I watch the smoke pump up for a minute. The occasional dart of orange appears, then drops.

“Good thinking on the dozerline, Galloway. Keep going and we’ll meet you at the trail.”

Galloway copies, then Kershaw Lookout comes back on with a reply from Dispatch. The dozers and crew have been ordered, but probably won’t arrive until sometime later. Resources are scarce. As for the helicopter, none are available — all machines are on higher priority fires, meaning fires where structures are threatened. I plead for a helicopter — I hate working a fire blind, without air support. The Lookout assures me my concern will be passed on to Command and signs off.

“Now what?” says Brashaw, staring at the canyon.

“Now we put your boys to work.”

As we drop off the toe of the ridge, the trail curves and we lose sight of the fire. An indistinct mass of white smoke, like an approaching storm, is our only guide. The trail snakes around boulders and clumps of large trees at the mouth of the canyon, crosses a small creek, then makes a hard right and drops sharply to some hidden destination on the far side of the northern ridge. We stop just back from the bend.

“Where does this trail go?” I ask Brashaw.

He shrugs. “Nowhere. There are some squatters about ten miles farther up, but that’s it.”

“Squatters?” I can’t imagine anyone making this drive frequently.

“Yeah. Old hippies and misfits. White trash.”

“Would they be in the path of the fire?”

Brashaw shakes his head. “Not with this wind.”

“Wind could change. We should think about evacuating them.”

“You can try,” he says, “but you might get shot. They’re pretty anti-government.”

I’m thinking that’s not a very good reason to remain in the path of a fire, and make a mental note to call Dispatch about this later. For now, given the topography, they’re relatively safe. We get out of the truck and watch the crew bus lumber to a stop behind us. It’s a boxy, green vehicle, higher than a normal bus. The name of the crew — Carson Lake Hotshots — is printed in black on the side. The door squeaks open and young men in green pants and yellow shirts emerge. They cluster along the side of the bus, watch the bank of white smoke hanging above the canyon, and I hear one or two muted comments about a curse. Brashaw gets them moving, opening cargo doors, pulling out chainsaws and hand tools. Hard hats are donned, equipment belts strapped on, backpacks shouldered. Handheld radios are tested, squelches adjusted. Behind the bus, the first engine pulls up, squealing to a halt, its tank rocking. Engine is a bit of a glorification — it’s just a big green water truck. A chubby, stubbled face peers out a side window.

“Jesus Christ,” says the driver as I approach. “That was one mother of a hill.”

Beside him, the engine module leader watches the smoke. He slips on a hard hat and climbs out of the truck, asks what the plan is. I tell him we’re going to wait until the dozer is up, cut a line from the trail straight to the tail of the fire. Once that’s done, he can pull in his engines and get to work.

“All right,” he says, staring toward the canyon, looking concerned.

“Is there a problem?”

He hesitates. “No — no problem.”

Brashaw saunters over. His men are ready, Pulaskis in hand, chainsaws resting on broad shoulders. I tell Brashaw that the brush is far

too dense and I don't want anyone in there, even at the tail of the fire, until the dozer has pushed in an anchor line. He tells his men, but they don't budge, preferring to wait with packs and saws ready, despite the heat and weight of the equipment. It's all part of the image — hotshots are the elite ground-pounders of the firefighting world.

As we're waiting for the semi-trailer with the lowboy and dozer, the brush rustles and the other elite warriors of the firefighting world appear. Sweaty, curly hair plastered to her forehead under an oversized hard hat, Sue Galloway extends a fire-blackened glove, and we shake hands. Introductions ensue, during which several of the hotshots give Galloway disapproving glances. Firefighting is the ultimate macho career and not all of the participants are thrilled with the female presence. Personally, I like the variety.

"We've got a line flagged right to the cliff," says Galloway, brushing hair out of her eyes.

"Excellent. How far from the trail is the fire?"

Galloway pauses for a drink of water. "About a hundred yards."

"Any sign of the origin?"

"Not so far," she says. "But I haven't had time to look."

"Let's go for a walk."

I motion Brashaw over and the three of us head into the dense green. Shrub and understory fir crowd beneath older larch, three feet in diameter. Mossy black beards hang like rags. Galloway takes the lead, following her line of fluorescent orange flags hung on branches. It's cooler and dimmer in here, shade maintaining the humidity — a stroke in our favour. The advantage won't last much beyond noon, just giving us a lag period for line construction. We don't go far before we see the first flickers of orange, getting as close as we can until the heat from the flames becomes uncomfortable.

The perimeter of the fire is a sharp line on the ground, hissing and crackling, crawling relentlessly outward, sending up tendrils of fragrant smoke. Tongues of orange dance on twigs and dry moss, lick along dead-fall. In places, where the branches of understory fir touch the ground,

fire races upward in a wild, ecstatic gush. We need to get that dozer rolling, cutting the monster from its fuel supply, and we need water.

I look at Brashaw. “We should check out that creek right away.”

“I’ll get someone on it,” he says, reaching for his radio. As he makes the call, I gaze into the blackened, smoking heart of the beast, where a forest lies half-digested, trees stripped of their needles, trunks oozing smoke. I need a good look at this thing from above so I can judge its mood, see where it intends to go, and how we can stop it. I’m not sending men anywhere near the head until I’ve got a good understanding of the terrain, fuels, and fire behaviour. Doing that strictly from the ground is like a blind man trying to describe an elephant by touch.

“That ridge where you jumped in,” I ask Galloway. “Is there a good view of the fire?”

She nods emphatically, her hard hat wobbling. “Oh yeah, you can see the whole thing.”

“How difficult would it be to get up there?”

She frowns. “Tough. It was a bitch bushwhacking down to the shoulder of the cliff. Nasty understory. Gives me the creeps, jumping in above a fire like that, especially when it turns out there’s ground access. I saw another trail farther back though, below the ridge when we were coming down. An old road or something. You might be able to 4x4 up there and walk in the rest of the way.”

I nod, filing the information away for later, and we walk back to the trail. The smokejumpers are resting in the shade. The hotshots stand in the sun, still carrying their hand tools and chainsaws, trying to look tougher than the jumpers. They stiffen when we emerge from the foliage. The lowboy and dozer have finally arrived. The skinner is on the dozer, firing her up. He backs the dozer down onto the trail, treads clanking, pivots the big machine toward the bush, then shuts it down so I can climb up.

Standing on the tread, I tell the skinner — an old guy with dense, woolly grey hair and bright blue eyes — that I want him to start cutting

along the flag line. I point out the start ribbon at the edge of the road, remind him to cut straight down to mineral soil, windrow everything on the side away from the fire. Don't get too close to the flames so nothing burning is pushed across. He assures me in a calm, gravelly voice that he's done this before.

The dozer roars and trees start to topple. Forest floor is peeled back like an old rug and everyone watches, in mutual appreciation, the massive amount of work being quickly completed. The smell of conifer sap and freshly torn earth mixes pleasantly with woodsmoke — the fragrance of the fireline. When the dozer is a tree length into the bush, the firefighters begin to follow. The drivers of the engines fire up their rigs, ready for action. I step onto a running board, have a few words with the module leader.

“You have foam with you?” I ask.

“Of course,” he says.

Together, we track the progress of the dozer, listen to the progression of toppling trees. My gaze wanders toward the trail, to the crew bus and lowboy with its waiting driver. Boxes of hose and spare hand tools neatly stacked out of the way. Something along the edge of the trail catches my eye — red and barely discernable at this distance. It's probably nothing, but I go for a look. I recognize it before I get there.

It's a fusee cap, its pull-strip curled back.

A fusee is a red, cylindrical flare used by firefighters to burn out fuel between a fireline and the active edge of a fire, thus robbing the fire of potential intensity so it can't jump the fireline. It's also handy to burn a safe area in case of an emergency, as Wag Dodge did on the infamous Mann Gulch fire.

It's too early in this fire for anyone to have need of one, so I lift my radio and call around, just to make sure.

“Galloway, this is Cassel. Have any of your people used a fusee on the fire?”

There's a pause; the answer comes back negative. Same answer from Brashaw.

I stand on the trail a moment longer, pondering the little red cap. Most arsons are started right from the edge of a road or trail, with the arsonist nervous and wanting a quick getaway. But this fire was started deeper in the bush, which takes time, walking both ways. This probably means it wasn't a hot start but was rigged as some sort of time delay. The arsonist placed the device in the bush so no one would see it from the trail, then got careless with the cap — flung it aside or dropped it shoving it into his pocket. But why walk so far into the bush? Maybe he thought the distance from the trail would be less obvious and no one would look too hard for the cause.

He's wrong.

I call Brashaw and Galloway, tell them to be on the lookout. Then I head into the fire.

The engine crew is already at work, hoses run from where the engine sits on the dozerline, water soaking the perimeter. This is where I go in, stepping over slippery black logs, pushing aside the barbed, black swivel sticks of the burned understory fir. I go in about forty yards and look around, taking note of the charred tree trunks, the burn pattern on deadfall. A fire always points to where it's been and, if you can read the signs, you can usually get a pretty good idea of where it originated. You start with the knowledge that fire burns outward from its point of origin, its behaviour modified by fuel, weather, and topography. A fire in calm weather conditions, in continuous fuel, will burn a perfect circle. A wind-driven fire will form an ellipse, the width-to-length ratio a function of wind speed. But that's under ideal, predictable conditions. A fire in a canyon, with erratic winds, variable fuel, and unknown moisture conditions, can be a little more challenging.

I walk slowly, watching the ground, watching tree trunks, checking scorch patterns on rocks. The fire cleaned out the understory, reducing fir and brush to slender spikes. There's a certain voyeuristic aspect to walking in a freshly burned forest — a sudden, injured nakedness; trees stripped of their foliage. Solitary old growth larch, blackened but

not entirely burned, stand like tall, determined, survivors. Deadfall, normally hidden and treacherous, forms a crisscross pattern like a relief map. My eyes track across smouldering devastation, thinking about the fusee. It would have been planted in duff or dry litter — fine enough fuels to easily ignite — and positioned securely so it wouldn't topple as it burned down. Either way, it wouldn't be set far from the road. A fusee burns for a maximum of thirty minutes, and the arsonist would want a quick, clear route back to his waiting vehicle. He must have made a dash for the trail then driven like mad, because we didn't meet any vehicles on our trip in.

Maybe the fire was started by one of the squatters, who then high-tailed it home. Or the arsonist is farther up the trail, waiting for night to sneak out. I make a mental note to post a guard on the trail and look for tire tracks.

There's a narrow creek in the burn, a dark meandering line bordered by dense black spears of incinerated spruce and fir. The creek is pretty shallow, but perhaps we could dam it and put a pump there. It's also an obvious route back to the trail, maybe a way to hide the scent of boots, so I go for a closer look. Branch stubs tug at my clothes as I struggle through the hedge, leaving long black marks. But the creek is clogged with deadfall and I revise my theory. Backing out, a branch stub tears a strip off the sleeve of my shirt, scraping my arm hard enough to draw blood. I stand for a minute, holding the abrasion, and look around. Char patterns on tree trunks point everywhere; the fire was pushed around by the wind playing across the canyon.

Other indicators may be equally unreliable. I'll have to approach this one differently.

The tail end of a fire grows slowly, backing into the wind. I notice the perimeter at the tail of this fire is different on both sides of the creek — the far side has burned closer to the road. This could mean a difference in fuel type, but I don't think so. The fire was started on the far side and took some time to build sufficient intensity to jump the creek.

On the other side of the creek, the view is much the same but, by using the difference in distance the fire backed into the wind on either side of the narrow drainage, I can estimate how much farther into the burn I should be looking. This, coupled with a quick calculation of the current spread rate, should put me in the right neighbourhood. I pace the distance and look around.

Then I see it: a game trail, beaten into the forest floor. It's faint but unmistakable, a thread of crushed moss not as completely burned. Only a short section of trail is visible, but it wanders toward the road and I get a shiver of anticipation. I don't follow it far before I find the origin.

Arsonists love fusees — they burn hot, they're easy to use, and they're common — but they leave plenty of evidence in the form of a white, ceramic residue. From the shape of the residue here, it's apparent this fusee was propped at a near-vertical angle. As it burned down into itself, the molten residue built a tube around the jet of flame, falling off at regular intervals. I pick up one of the pieces, white and hard like bone, and sniff it; the usual sulfur smell. Crystals tinted green and orange have formed inside the tube like miniature heads of cauliflower. I set the piece back where I found it and examine the blackened ground. Small splatters of white slag are scattered close by, castoffs from jetting through the casing of the fusee when the slag cap sealed off the top. These jets, which can eject hot slag several feet, are usually what starts the fire, which then burns both outward and back to the fusee. Even so, arsonists always pile fuel at the base, and this example is no different. There are delicate black threads of carbon: dried grass and moss. It's a simple setup, not very inspired, but dependable. I pull a roll of fluorescent pink ribbon from my pocket — a colour I use specifically for such occasions — and tie a generous portion to a nearby tree.

I unholster my radio. "Brashaw and Galloway, this is Cassel. I found something at the origin and marked it with pink ribbon. It's on the north side of the creek, maybe a hundred yards into the fire, but you should be able to see it from quite a distance. Make sure no one works the area or goes in for a look. Let's keep the scene clean."

“No problem,” says Brashaw. Galloway gives me a double-click, the salutation of busy firefighters everywhere. While I’ve got the radio in hand, I call Kershaw Lookout, pass on that I have a confirmed arson and need a fire investigator. After a lengthy pause, the tower informs me that an investigator from the district will arrive in about two hours, and tells me to ensure I mark and protect the origin. And don’t pass any sensitive information over the radio. The voice is filled with excitement, being part of the intrigue. Smiling, I assure her that I’ll follow orders.

I’m part way down the trail, pausing for a look back to confirm the visibility of the pink ribbon, when the wind picks up suddenly, blowing ash. Flames along the perimeter quadruple in height. There’s a merry campfire sound, but I’m not impressed — wind is what makes the difference between a small fire and a big one. Wind is what kills people. A cluster of trees go up together, flames licking wildly forty feet into the air. When their needles are gone, the trees flame out, trailing smoke like spent birthday candles. I call Brashaw on the radio.

“You catch that wind, BB?”

“Yeah.” He sounds as concerned as me.

“All your men square if it starts to get squirrely?”

“They’re good. They’ll stay at the tail, close to the road.”

I check with Galloway. Her men are farther up, ahead of the dozer. They’ll fall back.

For a few minutes, I stand and watch flames on the perimeter, gauging the wind, waiting to see what else it might do. The wind gusts a few more times, then settles down again, stronger than it was before. The tone of the fire has changed. Smoke, drifting like a fog bank above the canyon, has doubled in height. I need to see what the fire is doing.

“Brashaw, this is Cassel. Meet me at the road.”

“Sure, what’s up?”

“We’re going up that ridge for a look.”

Brashaw copies and I head out of the fire, following the narrow path of the game trail. Sometimes, as an arsonist exits the scene of a

crime, they leave behind clues — called transfer evidence — such as footprints, scraps of clothing, or hair caught on branches. But there's nothing. Fire is a marvellous cleanser.

I arrive at the road to find two new water trucks with Carson Lake Fire Department printed on the side. Three firefighters stand behind one of the engines, talking and pointing toward the fire. They see me, and one ambles over.

"Looks like you got a bit of excitement here," he says.

I nod, offer a handshake, introduce myself as the incident commander.

"Name's Hutton," he says. "I didn't know you guys were already on this one." Hutton is tall and lanky, tanned, early forties. He's wearing black wraparound shades and no hard hat; his receding hair blows lightly in the breeze. "We could stick around for a while, if you'd like."

"Great." I'm not about to turn down help.

"At least until we dump these loads." He glances back at his engines. They're not big trucks, but every gallon counts. "If we get a call in town though, we'll have to leave."

"Understood."

"Where do you want us?"

I point toward the fresh scar of the dozerline. "We're cutting a line to the south. When the dozer has tied into that cliff on the south flank, he'll come back and start cutting on the north side. We've got two trucks on the south line already, so you may as well wait until the dozer gets back and starts going north."

Hutton nods, scuffing the hard surface of the rutted trail with the toe of his work boot. He's got a calm self-assurance about him. He doesn't have to be here — the local fire department is almost certainly volunteer — and although I don't doubt his dedication, there are certain aspects of a fire this big that his crew simply isn't trained to handle.

"I'll have you work with our smokejumpers."

Hutton nods again, but he's scowling a little. "Okay."

Brashaw trudges into sight along the dozerline, puffing, his folds jiggling. He looks over to where Hutton and his men are strapping on gear and they nod in mutual recognition. Brashaw mops his forehead with a kerchief that hangs around his neck bandito-style, watching the smoke rise into the sky. Big beads of sweat cling to his cheeks.

“Goddamn,” he says. “That wind sure picked things up.”

The trail to the ridge is overgrown. Trees lean threateningly and the trail winds like a goat path. Heavy green branches brush side windows, slapping the glass and thumping the roof. I’ve given up readjusting my side mirrors, and my radio antenna is in serious jeopardy. Brashaw stares gloomily at the wall of green around us.

“Piss fir,” he mumbles. “Nothing but piss fir.”

“What?”

“Alpine fir. Burns like piss.”

We drive in silence for a few more minutes. The trail hugs the backside of the ridge, rising but still a good distance from the crest. It looks like we’ll have a bit of a hike ahead of us, which makes me nervous. I don’t like to be on foot anywhere near a fire in bush this dense. Wind direction is straight up the canyon too. We’ll be fine, but I’m still nervous. Maybe it’s Brashaw’s spooky campfire story. He shifts his bulk and sits up, looking ahead intently. “I know this road,” he says.

“How close does it come to the ridge top?”

“This is the road to that bear hunting camp.”

“The one from your story?”

“Yeah.” He has an almost comical look on his face. He’s working on his story, building it up again. “We shouldn’t be here,” he says. “We should turn back.”

“What?”

He looks at me. “This is a bad place.”

I’m not sure if he’s referring to the heavy timber or if he’s just superstitious.

“We’ll be fine. The wind is steady up the valley and there’s a dozer-line to the cliff.”

“Yeah, I know. But I got a bad feeling.”

A bad feeling. He’s played this about as far as I’m willing to take it. I’m about to tell him so when we come around a bend and find a small tree across the road. I brake and get out, expecting BB to follow and help move the tree, but he just sits in the truck. I give the tree a few tugs — it’s just a big sapling from the understory — but it’s too resilient to snap off. So I get an axe from the toolbox and whack it into a few chunks. By the time I’ve dragged them off the road, I’m sweating and in no mood for campfire stories. Brashaw must sense this, because he doesn’t say anything. We gear up and lurch forward. The trail continues to rise, then levels for a short stretch, wider where someone cut out a few trees. Brashaw frowns and, looking ahead, points to the widened area.

“Pull over,” he says. “We’ll have to walk from here.”

The fir on the slope is dense enough that I hang a few orange ribbons on the trek to the top of the ridge. The slope is steep and we grab onto slender tree trunks to heave ourselves up. When we break out of the trees near the crest of the ridge, we both lean forward, bracing arms against shaky legs until our breath returns.

“I’m too old and fat for this shit,” Brashaw says between lungfuls.

The view from the ridge is worth the climb; it’s like standing at the lip of a volcano. The fire has widened from its origin near the road and the head spans the width of the canyon. Smoke boils up in a dense grey column. Flames glow orange, like glimpses of flowing lava. The canyon is a perfect chimney up the side of the mountain. There’s no way we’re getting in front of that.

“Christ,” says Brashaw. “That’s a real burner.”

We need aircraft. Heavy bombers. Helicopters with buckets.

I call Dispatch. Kershaw Lookout compliments me on my spectacular smoke, but relays the same response. Houses threatened on a

fire to the south. All available aerial resources committed. I grind my teeth, wondering how they expect us to accomplish anything. I call Kershaw Lookout again, get the winds and RH, request Dispatch do a spot forecast. The wind feels stronger up here and the change of the smoke from white to grey is not good.

Radio chatter from the crews on the fire indicates the show is heating up on the ground. I call Galloway, confirm her men have fallen back. They have. Brashaw calls his crew, tells them to make sure they're on the dozerline, not in the dense fir and larch. They acknowledge and pass on that the dozer is still a few hundred yards from the cliff. I pace nervously, watching the fire. I'm not letting it out of my sight until we get some aircraft. I call Kershaw Lookout and tell them that the fire is now two hundred acres and growing rapidly, stressing the limited window we have for air tanker drops.

Kershaw tells me to stand by.

I continue to pace, shale grinding under my boots. A strip of rock just back from the drop off, about twenty yards wide, has been blasted by wind and exposure. Nothing grows here except a few hardy junipers, low to the ground. Perfect spot to jump into. There's a small pile of gear from Galloway's crew: neatly-stowed parachutes and jump helmets. I call Galloway on the radio, confirm Hutton and his men are working with them. While I'm on the radio, Brashaw stands at the top of the cliff, shaking his head and muttering. He squats and carefully takes a seat on the edge of the cliff.

After a few more minutes of pacing, I join Brashaw at the lip of the volcano, dangle my feet in the air. Rock drops a good hundred feet to a jumbled talus slope, then to burnt trees farther down. The sound of clanking treads and splintering wood drifts up like an overheard conversation. I look for the dozer but it's invisible from this angle.

"Nice view," says Brashaw, spitting, watching the foamy flecks descend.

"Wonderful. So what happened to the Indians?"

"What?" He squints at me, his face glistening with soot and sweat.

“The Indians — the ones who cursed this valley?”

He shifts on the hard rock. “A long time ago, settlers and Indians were fighting over some valley land, farther down. Settlers wanted to put their stock there, but the Indians wouldn’t let them. Kept killing the cows. One day, a girl goes missing — one of the settlers’ daughters — and someone gets into their head that the Indians took her. They form a posse and raid the Indian camp, but the girl isn’t there. So they figure the Indians killed her and there’s a big fight. The Indians are outgunned and make a run for it, the posse in hot pursuit, and they chase the Indians into this canyon.”

Brashaw pauses to dig a can of chewing tobacco from a pocket — the skilled storyteller.

“Well, they got the Indians trapped, but the bush is too thick to go in and find them. They know the Indians will hide in the canyon until they’re gone. You want to guess what they did?”

Brashaw is watching me, his lower lip bulging with tobacco. I shrug.

“They started a fire at the mouth of the canyon. Burned them all up.”

We both stare at the cauldron of fire and smoke in the canyon below. I’m getting an uncomfortable feeling that everything Brashaw has told me is true, and start to appreciate his reluctance. Firefighters can be a superstitious lot — comes from living so close to danger — and for a minute there’s a hush. The dozer has paused in its operation and even the radio is silent. It’s eerie. Then the radio barks, snapping us both out of our reverie. It’s Kershaw Lookout.

“Cassel here.”

“Dispatch says they’ll free up a bomber group for one run, after they dump once more.”

“Great. Any word on a helicopter?”

The voice on the radio is apologetic. “Not until tomorrow.”

One tanker drop is better than nothing. If the drop is good, the wind dies down a bit, and we have a decent RH recovery tonight, we might be okay. I’m thanking the tower and getting an update on the winds when a worried voice cuts in.

“Break — break. This is Galloway. We’ve got fire over the line.”

I turn to look toward the tail of the fire — the only place there is any line — and as I key the mike on the radio I see a sheet of grey smoke rising over the treetops of the ridge, feel an anxious clench in my gut. This is no little spot fire. This is in the crowns of the piss fir coming up the side of the ridge. Toward us. I should have seen it minutes ago but was looking the wrong way. I release the transmit button on my radio and Galloway’s voice comes back on, controlled but wavering slightly.

“— didn’t see it until just now. We thought it was in the canyon.”

As Brashaw and I watch, radios in hand, the sheet of rising smoke quickly doubles in height. A fire on a slope preheats the fuel in front of it, the pitch of the slope acting like wind, accelerating the speed and intensity of the flame front. With the wind we already have, it’s a dangerous combination. Curls of black smoke boil up — the fire burning so hot it’s not getting enough air — and for a moment all I can do is stare at the wavering serpent rising above the treetops. Then Galloway’s voice cuts through.

“It’s really moving. You guys had better get the hell out of there!”

Together we bolt for the trees, knowing the only way out is on the trail, in our truck, but we can’t find the ribbon line I’d flagged on the way up. Hearts thumping at the sudden precariousness of our situation, we run back and forth along a solid wall of green. Brashaw swears and crashes into the bush. I follow. Going downhill, we have to hit the trail. We’re not far into the trees when Brashaw trips. I run side-slope, ducking branches, and help him to his feet.

He staggers when I let him go. “Twisted my damn ankle.”

“You okay to keep going?”

He looks at me, knowing that he’s far too heavy for me to carry. That I may have to leave him behind. It’s not something I’m prepared to do. He takes a few steps to test the ankle. He can move on his own, but he’s going to be slow and the fire is rapidly gaining on us. What was just a distant crackle is now a steady roar and when I glance toward the

noise I see the space between the trees is filled with orange. A gust of hot air blasts across my face. We don't have much time to decide.

Keep going downhill and try for the truck? Return to the ridge and deploy our fire shelters in the open?

The truck is halfway down the slope. If it doesn't start, we're dead. If there's a tree farther up blocking the trail, we're dead. If the trail ends, we're dead. On the other hand, we're not far from the ridge, but it's uphill all the way.

"We're going back up," I yell at Brashaw. "Deploy in the open."

He nods, the look in his eye deeply concerned.

"Come on," I tell him. "I'll help you."

He drops his pack and together we start up the slope, using tree trunks and branches to heave ourselves forward. Barely audible against the roar of the fire, our radios blare a mix of urgent voices. Brashaw has an arm over my shoulder but he's doing most of the work. We divert around a massive old ponderosa — survivor of some earlier fire — and Brashaw pauses for a moment, wheezing. His cheek has a strange hue to it, a sort of glow, and I look past him. It's a mistake.

A hundred yards away, the forest is engulfed in pulsing orange. Tree trunks are slender stems amidst a mane of gushing flame. There's a pounding, thundering roar like standing under a waterfall. The skin on my cheek tightens against the uphill blast of heated air. We have a minute to make it to the top. I glance forward, pushing Brashaw ahead.

"Run, goddamn it!"

Brashaw surges forward, scrambling, lugging himself up. I no longer hear him wheezing; I hear only the growl of the beast at our heels, crunching up trees. Thirty more yards to go uphill, then another ten or so in the open until we can deploy. A rabbit blurs past me on the ground. Twenty yards. My shirt is hot against my skin. Ahead of me, Brashaw's damp shirt is steaming. I push him forward, trying to will him up the slope. His steps are awkward, stilting. Ten yards to the edge of the trees, the fire seems to pause, take a deep breath. I pass Brashaw and he looks at me, his brow deeply furrowed, a look of intense con-

centration on his face. We're almost clear of the trees when the fire exhales, knocking us both down, blowing my hard hat off my head. I scramble forward, grab my hard hat and cram it on, feel the hair at the back of my head curl and singe. We break from the timber and run in a crouch toward the cliff. I want to keep going, throw myself over into cooler air.

"Deploy! Deploy!"

I'm not sure if the voice is in my head or if I'm screaming it. We're in an oven. The rock around us glows orange. If we turn toward the fire we'll surely burst into flame. Brashaw is clawing at the yellow pouch on his belt. I pull my own fire shelter from its pouch, yank the pull cord down on the plastic package. The shelter comes out as a small, silver brick, unfolding in a zigzag pattern like some child's Christmas decoration. Hot wind tugs at the shelter as I open it, trying to tear it from my hands. A wave of pain flashes over my back and arms. It's too late.

Brashaw is down beside me, a small silver pup tent.

I pull the shelter over my head, step onto the other end, drop next to Brashaw and press my face against rock and dead moss. The temperature only inches above the ground may be dramatically higher. The flames are over us now, tugging at the shelter, trying to tear it off and flatten it out. The noise is terrible, like the meshing of immense gears in some horrible, angry machine. My radio squawks with distant, unrecognizable voices. Despite my hands and boots holding down the bottom edges of the shelter, my back feels as though it's on fire and I'm overcome by fear that the top of the shelter has been ripped open and I'm exposed to the full fury of the firestorm. A careful glance to the side confirms the shelter is still there. Bright orange spots show through pinholes in the foil.

My gloved fingers begin to burn where they touch the foil, and I want more than anything to let go. I try to focus elsewhere, remembering images from a training video where tests were conducted to determine the limits of a shelter. Silver pup tents, like the one I'm clinging to, are engulfed in whipping flames while the narrator calmly

explains: “At five hundred degrees Fahrenheit, the glue holding the foil to the fibreglass breaks down, the layers separate and the foil can be blown out of place or torn by turbulent winds. At twelve hundred degrees Fahrenheit, the foil itself begins to melt —” The silver pup tents in the training video whip in the wind. Foil contracts and lifts. The shelters vaporize like houses during a nuclear bomb test. This isn’t helping and my mind searches desperately for something reassuring. I close my eyes and think of my sister Cindy and her three kids. I think of Telson and our sometimes relationship, vow I’ll spend the rest of my life with her if I survive this. I picture my parents at their coffee plantation in Jamaica, working on a lush green mountainside.

A splintering crash jolts my thoughts back to the present. I wince as something hits the top of my shelter, pulling it down and drawing a line of fire across my back. Instinctively I buck upward, knocking off the weight of the object and restoring a narrow air space. A line of pain remains on my skin like a brand. Flames gush louder and much closer than before. I feel a sudden rush of heat on my right side and close my eyes, grit my teeth, telling myself this can’t go on much longer. Fire needs fuel to burn and fuel can’t last indefinitely. But it doesn’t stop. It gets worse.

A flash of light burns through my closed eyes and I push my face harder against the rock. The heat is unbearable and I realize with a sickening jolt that the side of the shelter must have lifted, exposing me to the fire. Carefully, I turn my head, see my gloved hand on the edge of the foil. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a bright light, turn my head a little further.

What I see confuses me.

A patch of orange behind a hazy film. Flashing ribbons of silver. Then I understand. A flap of foil on the right side of my shelter has separated and lifted, like opening a window. I’m looking through the white fibreglass mesh, the heat of the fire blasting through like a jet engine. The ribbons of silver dancing in the orange are from Brashaw’s shelter, only feet away. Beyond that I see a heavy branch, like a fiery

groping arm. Then the flap of foil settles back in place on my shelter, and the oven door closes.

“You okay BB?” I shout as loudly as I can.

There’s no response.

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE