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The Wildfire Season

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Published by HarperCollins

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ONE

He must go far, but not too far. Someplace lightning would choose. A tree that is a foot or two taller than its neighbours, one with a drop sheet of needles around its base. Too much regrowth will only lead to a telltale explosion. On the other hand, there will have to be enough fuel to nurture the smoke, keep it alive while teaching it to go slow. The firestarter had assumed the perfect location would make itself plain once he was out here. Instead, nowhere looks right.

There are moments when he thinks he might be lost. His squinting attention to particular corners of the forest makes his head swim when he lifts it to get his bearings. He has never been afraid in the bush before. Then again, he isn't himself, is he? Maybe *he* would never become lost so close to where he started, but the *firestarter* might.

Doing this thing, he refuses to think of himself as himself. A split personality, if only for today. It's not shame that forces him to hide—he has his reasons for being here, or a set of compulsions anyway, even if he has trouble recalling them now, so occupied is he by the act alone. He is the firestarter and not himself mostly because it makes it easier. A man temporarily free of history, attachments, implications. For now, he's a soldier on a mission, acting on faith in the wisdom of his orders.

As if folding its arms, the forest blocks his progress. He punches forward, kept on his feet by an elastic web of spruce branches. Once, he gets trapped in a standing coffin of twigs and is forced to hack his way out with his knife. As he thrashes free he hears himself whimper. A sound he doesn't recognize as any he's ever made before.

In time, he finds that he stands in a small clearing. Indiscernible from the dozen bald patches he has already passed through and dismissed as unsuitable.

Here.

Later, someone might even figure it out.

It started here.

He snaps the campfire sticks he picked up at the outfitter's in Carmacks into cubes and drops them randomly, one at a time, as he paces. Will two sticks be enough? He decides three would be better, just to be sure. Then four. He takes the tin of kerosene from his pack and sprays it in spidery lines reaching out from the duff he has raked into a small pile with his hands. He thinks he may have overdone it a bit but reminds himself that whatever evidence he leaves behind will be turned to ash long before he makes it back to town.

The firestarter plucks the Zippo from his breast pocket. He pauses long enough to stroke his thumb over the illustration etched into its silver plate. A habit. One that is observed every time he holds the lighter in his palm before lifting the same thumb to turn the flint. Over the years, both in his own possession and those of its previous, anonymous owners, the drawing's lines have been smoothed, the words printed beneath it faded, though still readable. *New York City*. Atop this caption, the Manhattan skyline is rendered from a thousand feet above the island's south tip, so that the Chrysler Building is a pope's hat in the distance and, looming in the foreground, the twin towers stand guarding all that lies behind them.

They were gone now, of course. He can't believe it was nearly four years ago that he watched them collapse into aprons of dust on TV, then wonders what isn't right about four years, whether it feels longer ago or more recent than that. Not that he'd ever seen them when they were still around. He'd never been to New York in his life. The distance between there and where he is now strikes him as preposterous, science-fictional.

Where had he gotten the Zippo, anyway? A gift, he thinks, or maybe not. He's not sure who gave it to him if it is. It's just one of those mass-produced souvenirs that make their way around the world, a cousin in the family of Maid of the Mist pens and Mao alarm clocks, drifting from hand to hand, the original sentiment attached to its purchase long rubbed away.

The firestarter is ready now. All he needs to do is flick the lighter and touch the flame to the accelerants spilled around his boots. Yet, for another moment, he does nothing but study the words and grooves of the Zippo's face with a pointless intensity. What does he want these familiar hieroglyphs to reveal? Now, after so long spent in his pockets, lying on dresser tops, lost and found in the chasms between sofa pillows?

He's only waiting for the answer to why he has come here to return. Already, he's learned that this is the problem with being two people at once. The motivations of one tend to slip away for stretches so that, acting as the other, he finds himself having thoughts he doesn't know the beginning or end of.

Still, even the intentions of a stranger standing in the woods with a lighter in his hand aren't difficult to guess.

With one more pass of his thumb over the lines of Manhattan, he starts a fire.

Then he bends to his knees, cups his hands on the ground, and starts another.