

Whiskey Creek

Sample chapter of novel by Dave Hugelshaffer

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I've got bottles on my mind lately—Whiskey and rum. *Captain Morgan. Canadian Club.* My drinking problem is in the past, but I've got another problem, more abstract. These bottles keep showing up at wildfires, blackened and broken into shards. I've spent a lot of time these last two weeks gluing shards of glass together like an archeologist reconstructing Bronze Age pottery. My latest project sits on the pressboard dresser at my bedside, several pieces missing, jagged like someone shot off the top.

This bottle wasn't shot, but thrown, shattering against a tree.

I sit on the edge of my bed, in a tiny room in a trailer complex at the edge of the Fort Chipewyan airport, and ponder the reconstructed bottle. Thin trails of glue have exuded from between the cracks, like grass growing through the gaps in a cobblestone drive. It's not quite five o'clock in the morning and I've been awake for an hour or more, unable once again to get a good night's sleep. Over the past few months I've grown increasingly tired. Perhaps it's age—I'm forty now. Perhaps age is just accumulated sleep deprivation. Eventually you become so tired, you just lie down and sleep forever. Catch up. Not a very lucid theory but at five in the morning, thoughts tend to roam. I turn over the bottle, run my fingertips over the ridges.

The bottle was most likely filled with a mixture of gasoline and diesel, a rag stuffed into the open throat, then lit and tossed into the forest. A simple Molotov cocktail—classic of rioters and revolutionaries. Puzzling, as there's nothing to protest in the forest and it leaves behind plenty of evidence. In my experience as a fire investigator, most wildfires are started in a manner that leaves little or no evidence. A match. A wad of burning paper tossed into dry grass. Usually, the ignition source is simple and nearly impossible to find. If the arsonist leaves evidence, he's either careless or wants to leave a

calling card—which appears to be exactly what’s happening with the bottles. They all have three letters etched about an inch above their base.

F.T.C.

My name is Porter Cassel and I work as a contract investigator, mostly for the Alberta Forest Service. In winter, when the forest is covered in snow and ice, I pick up the odd missing person case, or unfaithful spouse job, but working wildfire arson, one of the most difficult crimes in the world to solve, is really what gets my motor running. The other stuff is easy—review phone and credit card records, interview people, sit in my truck with a camera and wait for a cheating husband to pop out of a hotel room—but wildfire arson is something else. Unlike arson in the city, the scene of a wildfire is usually huge and the method almost impossible to find. Imagine looking for a paper match or cigarette butt in a fire the size of a small town. Then there’s the people: The motives of a wildfire arsonist are different than those of an urban fire setter, who is usually motivated by revenge or personal gain, while the forest fire bug is often a disenfranchised misfit. The metro flame jockey will hang around with a crowd to watch the show, conveniently available for videotaping or recording their license plate. But there isn’t a crowd at a wildfire—people tend to run the other direction, eyes wide with panic. If the arsonist is watching, he’s hidden, usually at a distance. To top it off, firefighters often unintentionally contaminate or obliterate what little evidence remains. So why do I do it?

I can’t resist the odds.

These last few fires are particularly unusual and I hold the bottle up in the light, examine the etching. It was likely done with a small rotary drill; the type used by hobbyists and available everywhere. What the letters mean, I have no idea. Obviously, it could be someone’s initials—the simplest of calling cards—and I’ve compiled a list from the local phone book of names that contain matching initials. It’s a fairly short list; Fort Chip isn’t much more than a sneeze on the map. Nine hundred people. Two stores. Two restaurants. Plenty of bored kids, which so far is my only theory.

The bang of a door. Heavy steps in the hallway. A heavier knock.

“Porter—you up?”

“Yeah, come in.”

“No time,” says the voice. “We got another one.”

The steps recede down the hall as I set the bottle back on the nightstand. Number five, more than likely. I pull on yellow Nomex coveralls, grab my hardhat, belt and pack—which seems inordinately heavy this morning. The belt clicks shut and sags against my hip, loaded with water bottle, radio, first aid kit and other assorted indispensable goodies. When I turn on the radio, voices blast like the staccato burst from a machine gun and I wince, turn down the volume. Dispatch is giving directions—the fire is northeast along the lake, in the vicinity of Whiskey Creek. The crew leader responds; tells dispatch they’re on their way. Overlaying the voices, the steady thump and whine of rotors and turbo engine—they’re leaving without me—and I scramble to pull on steel-toed boots, rush out the door.

I make it outside just in time to see a large white-and-blue helicopter rise off the ground, tilt forward and thump upward into the sky, leaving me to shield my eyes against a blast of sand. When the dust settles I watch the departing helicopter grow smaller. Four other firefighters join me, geared-up and ready. They’re native—the local Initial Attack Crew, and normally they would be in a helicopter, headed for the fire. Lately though, they’ve had to take second seat to a seven man HAC crew—specialized firefighters trained in rappelling down a rope from a hovering helicopter. They don’t often get a HAC crew staged in Fort Chip, and the local boys aren’t thrilled at playing second fiddle to a group of young white university students.

“They left you behind,” says Rolly, the native crew leader, grinning at me. He has a sly sense of humor and I liked him immediately when I met him two weeks ago. He slaps me on the back. “You’re just not that important, Porter.”

I’m not surprised the HAC left me behind; the last fire when I flew with them they had to rappel and were delayed—they aren’t allowed to rappel if there is anyone not rappel-certified on board. They had to divert and land me in a meadow a few miles away. I understand their reluctance at taking an uncertified passenger, but I prefer to see the fire upon first discovery, to note the color of the smoke, initial fire behavior and—if it might be an arson—any indication of a suspect fleeing the scene. I hate working with less than the optimum amount of information, but this morning I have little choice.

“Just about as important as you guys, I guess.”

Rolly laughs. “We both been scooped this time.”

Animal, the second in command, smiles wistfully. “That’s a humbug.”

Everyone here has a nickname. Usually, the origin is obscure. Animal, for instance, is a little guy, young and shy and nothing like his moniker might suggest. When I’d asked what was behind his alias he just grinned, looked away. It’s the same with everyone.

“What now?” asks Sachmo, a stocky native with a big head, brush cut and unusually large mouth. He bears a passing resemblance to Louis Armstrong—the great ‘Satchel Mouth’ trumpet player, which I’m speculating is the source of his nick name. But it’s just a theory.

Rolly kicks a pebble. “Spend some more of the government’s money doing something critically important for the health and preservation of our fine forests.”

“Ping pong?” says Turkey, the fourth member of the crew. He’s tall, lanky, has a large protruding Adams apple. I’ve decided his alias is due to his goofy behavior.

“Exactly,” says Rolly. “You going to join us, Yellow Hair?”

That would be me. They slapped that label on me the first day I got here. It’s not very dignified, but you don’t get to pick your nick name. And at least it makes sense—I have blond hair, far overdue for a cut.

“No, boys, I think we need to head to that fire.”

Rolly grins. “Good to have friends in high places.”

We head to the Initial Attack helicopter. It’s smaller as it needs to hold only a few people, unlike the big HAC machine, which can take a dozen passengers. Still, with the amount of gear stowed in the tail compartment, we can’t take the entire four-man IA crew if I’m heading out as well, so Sachmo and Turkey remain behind, to do their part abusing the ping-pong table. Rolly, Animal and I climb in and click together our seat belts, don headsets. I’m in the front, next to Arnie Poltz, the pilot. Arnie is middle-aged, sinewy, his balding head covered with a dusting of freckles. I’ve worked with him for years, on various fires, and he’s gotten me out of the odd tight scrape. He knows the drill and has been waiting in his helicopter, anticipating a quick get-away.

He flips switches as I buckle in. “Follow the big bird?”

I nod and the helicopter shudders as the ground drops away.

We bank left over the trees and Lake Athabasca comes into view, deep blue and vast as an inland ocean. Despite green leaves on the trees and daytime temperatures that make your skin crawl with sweat, there is still ice far offshore, floating like broken plates in a washtub. Spring comes late this far north. The fire season comes earlier—grass is dry and trees are dehydrated, straining to raise moisture from frozen ground. Perfect conditions for the arsonist who’s tossing blazing bottles into the forest. I look ahead, over a carpet of undulating jackpine, toward the distant pall of smoke, miles inland from the lake shore.

Behind me, Rolly peers over my shoulder.

“That bottle guy again, you think?” he says, his voice riding static in my headset.

“Maybe,” I say. “We’ll see soon enough.”

You can tell a lot about a fire from the smoke—behavior, fuels, moisture—and this smoke looks different from the four previous bottle fires. The previous fires had typical wildfire smoke, white or gray, while this fire is puffing up dark, blackish smoke. Normally, black smoke indicates extreme fire behavior; ignition proceeding too quickly for complete combustion, but this fire started at night when the humidity was relatively high. In fact, burning conditions are still subdued; the smoke is drifting low and thick.

“So when is the big day?” says Arnie, glancing over at me.

“We’re not quite sure,” I admit. “Has to be after the fire season. She wants an outside wedding, but it’s tough in my line of work. If the sun is shining, I’m usually working. I get my days off when it’s raining, or winter has set in. But we’re thinking September.”

“September is nice. Fall colors. No bugs.”

Rolly, seated invisibly behind me, is a disembodied voice in my headset: “Holy crap Yellow Hair—you’re getting married? You been holding out on us. Who’s the unlucky lady?”

I can’t help smiling, and flushing a little bit—which is embarrassing. Fortunately, Rolly can’t see me, or he’d never let me live it down. “The lucky lady’s name is Christina Telson.”

“That reporter you been seeing?” says Arnie.

I nod.

“I heard the news, but didn’t catch the name.”

“Like there’s been so many. I’m not exactly a Romeo.”

“Romeo Yellow Hair,” says Rolly. “Got a nice ring to it.”

Chuckling in my headset.

“Wonderful. You guys just keep your minds on the job.”

As we approach the fire, black smoke can be seen originating from a point source on the ground and mixing with lighter wood smoke. Something alien to the forest environment is burning. Ahead and below a thin ribbon opens among the crowns of pine and spruce, vanishing just as quickly as we cross over—a trail, wide enough to be used as a road, and my first thought is we have a vehicle fire. I glance ahead; the HAC helicopter is swirling smoke through its rotors as it makes a preliminary pass around the fire. I’m about to key my mike and ask them what they see when the voice of the HAC leader breaks in, passing his initial report to dispatch.

“Dispatch, this is VXH. We’ve got a cabin and vehicle on fire.”

“What state is the cabin in?” says dispatch, sound artificially calm.

“Not much left of it,” says the HAC leader. “Or the vehicle.”

“Can you see anyone on the ground?”

“Negative. We’ll have a look around.”

The HAC machine banks, glinting in the sun. We arrive at the fire and take our smaller helicopter to a higher elevation, safely out of the way, begin circling, all eyes focused intently on the ground. Tree tops float beneath us, dense green and conical in the drifting smoke. Patches of brown and green earth flash between the trees, intermixed with the bright orange of low flame. I’m hoping to see an upturned face, waving arms. What’s left of the cabin rotates into view—a black rectangle sending up tendrils of dark smoke. Sheets of what must be metal roofing form a crumpled black shroud over whatever remains beneath. Whoever remains beneath—no one has broken the ominous radio silence. Finally, dispatch breaks in.

“What are you guys seeing?”

Dispatch doesn’t sound calm anymore. I’ve an anxious clench in my gut.

“This is Cassel in TRT. I see no one on the ground.”

“What about you, VXH? You see anything, Hendrigan?”

A long pause as the HAC machine circles below us. “Nothing, dispatch.”

Another pause as the duty officer thinks. Carter Spence is on the desk—a young red-haired Forest Officer on his first posting. I doubt he’s ever had a building fire. Or what this could turn into when we get on the ground, search what remains of the cabin. As I wait, curious to see how he’ll respond, I assess the fire. About 10 acres, although with the drifting smoke, it’s difficult to determine an exact perimeter. Terrain is a shallow valley, blocked to the northeast by a rock ridge, which would make a good control point as it is sparsely treed. A narrow creek, which I take to be Whiskey Creek, flows through the fire, close to the cabin, suitable for a pump set-up. Fuel in the valley is dense mature spruce, of considerable height, surrounded as the terrain rises from the valley by dense pine—bad news if the wind picks up and pushes the fire into the crowns of the trees. Vehicle access from the southwest. No visible landing spot close to the fire.

I won’t be in charge of suppressing the fire, but old habits die hard.

Hendrigan, the HAC leader, will be the Incident Commander and passes on his assessment of the fire, requests additional manpower and gear. Normally, this is the point where the assessor decides if a fire investigator is needed, which is a moot point as I’m already at the scene. Dispatch directs that I be dropped off and the local initial attack crew returned to base, ready should there be another fire. Behind me, Rolly keys his mike so I have the benefit of hearing him sigh dramatically. Still scooped.

“Your time will come.”

“I’m more interested in my *overtime* coming.”

I smile, think of the unofficial Forest Service definition of fire: A chemical reaction that converts biomass into overtime. Arnie looks at me, an eyebrow raised.

“Where can I drop you?”

“Any old place will do,” I say, looking down.

“Step out any time you’re ready.”

There’s no opening below large enough to set down and the helicopter swings wide as Arnie searches for a landing spot as close to the fire as possible. As we bank away, I catch a glimpse of the big HAC helicopter, hovering above the treetops, and of a firefighter in yellow, rapidly descending a rope into the forest canopy. Then a blur of trees and we’re following the trail southwest. It’s narrow, meanders like a game trail.

No landing sites possible for miles, which is a shame—I want to walk the road for transfer evidence such as tire tracks, paint scrapes on the trees, anything that might have fallen off or been thrown from a vehicle. This might be another bottle fire, or just an accident, like smoking in bed, but I want to cover all the bases, check the road before a convoy of approaching vehicles obliterates any evidence.

I don't have time and signal Arnie to look elsewhere.

We try the creek, flying upstream from the fire, and don't go far before the valley flattens into a narrow grassy marsh. It looks soft, but it's covered with patches of low shrub. Most importantly, it has plenty of room for the rotors and I answer Arnie's questioning look with a nod. We drop quickly and Arnie eases the small helicopter into the best spot, close to the stream. The ground is hummocky and we can't touch down so he hovers the machine, one skid on a hummock the other in air, his face intent as he concentrates.

"This'll have to do, Porter."

"This is fine. Thanks Arnie."

The ground is mushy under my feet as I step off the hovering skid, dry yellow grass sinking beneath my boots. A divot forms around my feet, filling with water as the soggy ground sinks under my weight. As soon as Arnie sees that I'm clear, he pours on the power and the skid rises past me, at the periphery of my vision. Cold air presses me forward, challenging my balance, then I'm alone in the marsh, the only sound the receding thump of the helicopter.

It becomes very quiet and still.

I take a step, find more uncertain ground which yields alarmingly under my boot as dead stalks of grass tilt in around my ankle like the mouth of a Venus Flytrap. If I'm not careful, this marsh will swallow me whole, digest me. Some muskegs are nothing more than a skin of vegetation that has grown like a scab over an ancient lake. You can easily fall through and vanish in the muck. I hadn't expected this marsh to be so soupy this early in spring. I take a few less-than-gracefully steps toward the tree line, my pack flopping over one shoulder, ground sinking like I'm walking down stairs. No good—I'm going down, nothing but loon shit beneath me. I have just enough time to heave my pack clear, toward a patch of dry grass, then I'm up to my armpits in icy water, gasping from

the shock. It feels like an immense frozen hand is trying to crush me. I flail at a hummock in front of me, terrified I'll go right under into the brackish water. Fortunately, my boots hit ice, which doesn't help my thermal issues, but is solid and I tug myself out of the muck, on hands and knees, gasping, chest heaving, spider walk to my pack and drag it to firmer ground.

"Jesus Christ!" Baptized in Whiskey Creek.

When I've collected my wits and my heartbeat has returned from the panic zone, I shoulder my pack, turn on my radio, which thankfully still works despite the soaking, start walking downstream toward the fire. I've got about a mile-and-a-half to go.

My belt radio crackles. It's the HAC leader, Aldous Hendrigan. He's a bit touchy about his first name, which his parents gave him in honor of the writer Aldous Huxley. He'd have preferred to skip the honor and insists we use his last name, which of course gives us the option of using either, depending what mood we're in.

"You there, Porter?"

I fumble the radio out of its holster, hands rubbery from the cold water.

"Yeah, I'm here."

"I saw you flying up the creek, thought maybe you went fishing."

"Crossed my mind, but I forgot my rod."

"Well, when you're done sightseeing, we got a fire here you should look at."

"If you insist, Aldous. Be about a half hour. How's it look?"

"Well, the cabin is toast, burned right to the floor line. Truck's pretty crispy too."

"Any sign of the owner?"

"Negative, but there is one survivor. A dog. He's in rough shape, though."

"I'll be there as quick as I can. Remember not to touch the cabin or truck."

"Ten four, good buddy," says Hendrigan and I can't help but smile: It's not exactly normal radio protocol, nor is his sudden goofy southern accent. He's telling me, subtly, that he resents my reminding him how to do his job. Which is fine; not all firefighters are as diligent.

I holster my radio, walk briskly through the forest toward the fire. The radio blares intermittently with chatter as Hendrigan directs his men, updates dispatch on fire behavior and actions taken. Fire mostly on the ground with the occasional spruce tree

candling. Plenty of potential as the morning heats up or if we get any wind. Good water source. Pump being set-up. On the look out for the owner of the cabin, but no luck so far.

“What’s your take, Porter?”

It’s Mark Middel, the Chief Ranger. Carter Spence has been benched.

I grab my belt radio. “I’m on the ground, but not at the fire yet,” I tell him, explain about the diverted landing. I don’t tell him about nearly becoming the next bog man—it’s a bit embarrassing. Mark doesn’t sound impressed at having to wait for my detailed assessment. He’s had four previous confirmed arsons in the past two weeks and is feeling a bit of pressure, which he generously passes on. He tells me to double-time it to the fire, which works well with my plan to avoid hypothermia. Coveralls cling, cold and heavy, slowing me. Water squishes in my boots, making amusing gurgling sounds. A dog howls in the distance, forlorn, and I hope it’s not too badly burned. A pump starts at the fire, its distant whine steady and familiar.

I move out of the willows and buck brush, away from the creek to where the timber is tall, the understory sparse, pick up the pace. I’m chilled but fortunately it’s been unseasonably warm lately and this morning is no exception. Sunlight dapples the forest floor, spackles Labrador tea and moss with brighter splashes of color. As I walk I think about the previous arsons. The four bottle arsons were close to established gravel roads, the arsonist likely tossing the bottles from a vehicle. It’s tempting to consider this fire might be related but it’s never good to make assumptions early in an investigation. You get tunnel vision, start looking for evidence that fits your theory; ignore what doesn’t. I focus instead on my surroundings. An odor of smoke and damp moss. And something else.

I walk a bit further, sniffing the air.

No doubt now—rotting meat.

In the forest, rotting meat usually means a bear in the vicinity. A bear can smell decaying flesh for miles and will aggressively protect its dinner, remaining close to the carcass until it is completely devoured. Alone and unarmed, you don’t want to place yourself between a bear and his food and I look for the source of the odor. To my left is a border of willow along the creek; perfect cover for a snoozing bear. A twig snaps loudly

under my boot and to my right several large black birds squawk in the trees—another subtle warning sign. Ravens are scavengers and will sit in the trees around a kill, waiting for their turn at the prize.

I'm between the ravens and the willow hedge. Not a great place to be.

I waste no time putting myself on the other side of the ravens. They warble and rasp, picking new roosts. As I walk I look for the kill, wanting to know when I'm clear; stop when I see a black mound of hair. It's hard to see clearly from here but it looks like a bear. Any second it will raise its head and see me but for now it's oblivious and I remain still, waiting to assess its behavior, my heart beating a bit harder—the second burst of adrenaline this morning.

It remains oddly motionless.

A raven dives out of a tree, lands on the black fur, begins to pick at something.

A bear is not normally this patient and I approach cautiously. The raven flaps away, squawking indignantly. The bear is dead; a hole in its side where smaller scavengers have been enjoying this bonanza. More than likely, the owner of the cabin shot the bear, which made it this far before dropping. There may be another bear close by though, drawn by the odor, and I put some distance between myself and the smell.

Twenty minutes later, I'm at the fire perimeter.

* * *

The fire burned to the creek and I step across the narrow channel a dozen yards upstream from a whining pump, take a moment to survey the scene. Tall trees, trunks blackened. Smoke thick enough it burns the eyes—it smells of earth, plastic and burning debris, like a smoldering dump. A hose snakes across the ground to where yellow-clad firefighters work. A cluster of traps hang in a nearby tree. The gutted truck is about thirty yards away, sitting low on its rims, tires burned away. Beyond the truck is a screened view of what remains of the cabin. One corner rises like a crumbling spire, dovetailed log ends still discernable. I step over low flame which nibbles into damp grass along the creek, head for the cabin. Hendrigan meets me on the way.

“You stopped for a swim?” he says.

“Mud bath,” I tell him. “Good for the complexion.”

Hendrigan is taller than me and sparse. His stubble is streaked with soot. He gives me a cautious grin, but I can see he's nervous. The missing owner is weighing on everyone's mind.

"You notice anything suspicious?"

"It all looks suspicious," he says, glancing around.

All the HAC members are university students, filling their summer between school years with adventure and a good pay cheque. We have three budding mechanical engineers, two computer scientists, and a rehabilitation therapist working on the fire, as well as Hendrigan, a fourth year psychology major. They're all young, intelligent and observant, so I'm naturally interested in their impressions—particularly Hendrigan's.

"Why do you think it looks suspicious?"

Hendrigan gestures toward the cabin. "Well, we got a single vehicle and a burned cabin. Fire could have started at the truck, but that should have given the occupant of the cabin plenty of time to get out, and there's no sign of him, so I expect the fire started in the cabin and the poor bastard is still under there. Of course, he might have wanted to be under there."

"What do you mean?"

"Suicide."

"Perhaps. Or carelessness."

"Still," says Hendrigan, "he should have had time to get out, which leads us to the most sinister possibility. Homicide."

"Good analysis, Doctor Hendrigan."

Hendrigan gives me a wan smile. "I hope I'm wrong on all accounts."

"You and me both, buddy."

We regard the cabin silently for a moment, until our belt radios snap us back. Dispatch requesting yet another update. It's tough, being on the desk, blind to the operation and depending on others to be your eyes and ears. I let Mark Middel know that I'm at the cabin and commencing my investigation. Mark advises expediency.

I ask Hendrigan: "How close did you get to the cabin?"

"No closer than about five yards."

I'd have preferred they'd remained farther back and not contaminate the area with boot prints but it's a tough call, preserving evidence while looking for some sign of the occupant. They should have marked a path though—a single line of contamination.

"I want everyone to stay away from the cabin until I clear the area."

Hendrigan nods, looks around to check the position of his men.

"What about the truck? Did you approach that as well?"

"I took a peek. Nothing in there."

I squat, pull a camera from my pack. Until recently all I ever used were the cheap disposable cameras. They took reasonably good pictures and you could send the whole camera in for developing, or turn it over to someone else, like the RCMP. It was becoming difficult to find somewhere to develop film so I bought a digital, although I don't really trust the thing—too easy to accidentally lose data. At least with film, you know there's something physical in there. I take a few pictures from where I stand, cover the viewscape within the fire, then walk slowly toward the truck, studying the ground and surrounding tree trunks.

"What are you looking for?" says Hendrigan, walking beside me.

"Walk behind please."

Hendrigan falls in behind me.

"A few things," I tell him. "I'm looking for anything unusual that an arsonist might have dropped, or anything cast off from the fire, which might give me an indication of fire behavior. And I'm checking fire travel patterns on the ground and trees."

"To confirm the fire came from the cabin?"

"Or visa versa. Never assume. You see that tree over there?"

Hendrigan looks in the direction I'm pointing.

"Notice the char pattern is higher on one side."

"Yeah—on the side facing the creek."

"What direction do you think the fire was traveling?"

Hendrigan frowns. "Looks like it came from the creek and burned toward the cabin, but that doesn't make sense. The fire is clearly burning outward, getting larger."

"Fire burning around a tree creates a slight vacuum on the lee side."

“Pulling the flames higher,” says Hendrigan. “The fire came from the cabin.”

“According to one indicator. We’ll need more, to be certain.”

Hendrigan’s second-in-command calls over the radio. The helipad is brushed out. Hendrigan discusses next steps while I walk toward the burned truck, noting as I pass more tree trunks charred lower toward the cabin. The truck is an older Chevrolet half-ton with a fiberglass canopy. Neither have retained their collectors value. The windows of the truck are open and I peer inside the cab. Wisps of smoke rise from what remains of the seat—an acrid, nauseating odor. Chainsaw files and a screwdriver lie on the blackened dash. Keys are in the ignition—not a good sign. Reaching in through the window, I twist a metal clasp on the glovebox, coax open hinges seized by heat. They make an unpleasant sound, like my back first thing in the morning. The registration and insurance are charred to ash foil; one touch and they’ll disintegrate. But there’s something else in there.

A Whiskey bottle.

I slip on a work glove, carefully extract the bottle. *Canadian Club*. Empty. Perhaps the driver was the one who named the creek. Turning the bottle carefully over in my hand, I look for the etched letters I’ve come to expect, but there’s nothing. I set the bottle back in the glovebox, walk around the vehicle, look for anything obvious. Nothing. Pine needle ash. No boot prints. The helicopter thumps overhead, large orange Bambi bucket bulging with water as it swings in for a dump, dribbling water which patters across my hardhat. Behind the truck I jot down the license plate number. The stickers are just barely legible—it was insured until the coming August. I unclip my belt radio from its holster.

“Dispatch, this is Cassel.”

“Talk to me, Porter.”

“Burned-out Chevy half-ton. Cabin is gone.”

“Still no sign of the occupant?”

I glance toward the smoking rubble of the cabin. “Nothing yet.”

“Well, keep looking. We’re looking here, too.”

“I’ve got a license plate. Are you ready to copy?”

“Good thinking. Go ahead.”

I pass on the number: GFL 434.

He'll run the plate through the local RCMP, who he's put on notice. Mark sounds edgy. I promise to keep him informed, turn my attention toward the cabin. In the Green Area of the Province—the predominantly forested area—residential structures are not permitted, except commercial tourism operations and trap line cabins. Based on the traps hanging in the trees, it's obvious which category this cabin falls into, although it's large for trap line standards—perhaps a thousand square feet. Now, it's a thousand square feet of rubble. The four corners of the rectangular log structure burned the slowest and stand like the charred fingers of an immense hand, holding a palm full of twisted black metal roofing. The tin sheets didn't simply fall toward the floor—a fire is far too dynamic. They heated unevenly and twisted; bent as they collapsed with the roof. Many are curled like dead leaves, forming a jagged shroud over what lies beneath, crackling and sizzling. Smoke rises unevenly between the spaces.

“I really hope there isn't someone in there,” says Hendrigan, startling me.

“We'll find out soon enough. Right now, let's take care of that dog.”

Hendrigan leads me past an outhouse, untouched by fire.

“House and truck go,” he says. “But the crapper is fine.”

The dog is tied by a long chain to a tree about thirty yards behind the outhouse. It's a hound of some sort and as soon as he sees us he sets up a terrible racket, whining and crouching. The poor thing is black with soot from nose to tail and smells strongly of burned hair. Both ears are badly singed. A gooey discharge has oozed from its nose. There's an old hubcap filled with water nearby. “Calder brought him that,” Hendrigan says, following my gaze. “We didn't know what to do with him.”

I kneel in front of the dog, who is ecstatic at the attention, straining against its leash as it licks at my face. Its breathing is raspy—smoke inhalation or superheated air. It's not usually the flames that kill. Lungs sear shut and fill with fluid; he may be dying.

“That's a good boy,” I murmur reassuringly.

He places a paw on my forearm, cocks his head. I pull out my belt radio.

“Dispatch, this is Cassel. We need TRT back at the fire.”

“What for, Porter?”

“Medi-vac.”

“You found the occupant?”

“Not yet. But his dog is in bad shape.”

There’s a pause. “You want me to send TRT for a dog?”

“He needs immediate medical care.”

I think Mark is about to refuse when I hear him call TRT, send him to the fire. The dog lays its head on my crouched thigh, drools onto my coveralls. I wonder why he’s tied so far from the cabin. If I owned a dog, he’d be in my favorite chair in the house. But I’m allergic. Already, my eyes are itching. Soon I’ll be drooling worse than the dog. But I wait a few more minutes before moving—the dog is glued to my thigh. He whimpers as we disengage.

“Should we let him loose?” says Hendrigan.

“Better not. Given what he’s been through, he may run away.”

Hendrigan smiles. “I think he’ll just follow you.”

I picture a dog running amok through what might be a crime scene.

“He’ll be fine here until the helicopter arrives.”

Hendrigan returns to his men, working the perimeter. I return to the cabin, circle slowly, take photos, make notes, check fire travel indicators on trees, logs and underbrush. All evidence of fire travel points to the cabin as the origin. Once my preliminary documentation is complete, I find where the door of the cabin once stood, facing toward the truck.

Kneeling carefully, I begin a more detailed inspection.

The fire was incredibly hot, consuming the heavy log exterior wall and the periphery of the floor, where joists stick out from beneath blackened debris. Little briquettes of charcoal and discolored nails lie amid white ash. It would have taken a few hours for this much mass to be reduced and the heat to dissipate. Not that the site isn’t still hot—heat pulses from the debris, advising caution. I examine a bent strip of metal among the ash. It’s a door hinge, seized in position by heat. The door was left open, presenting several scenarios.

The occupant fled the burning cabin; the fire likely an accident.

The fire was set intentionally; the door left open to aid combustion.

If the occupant fled, why would the vehicle remain? Perhaps heat from the burning cabin prevented the owner from reaching it. I picture a man, covered in soot and half-crazed, running from the burning cabin into the darkness. He may be lost and injured. I unholster my belt radio, call dispatch, ask that the incoming helicopter make a few wider sweeps of the area to look for the missing occupant. Dispatch acknowledges.

I holster the radio, return to the task ahead of me.

A building fire is far more complex than a wildfire. There are additional factors in a building that affect fire behavior and spread. Walls and internal barriers. Synthetic materials, both combustible and non-combustible. Sources of ignition you would never find in a forest. Deciphering these clues requires specialized training, which I do not have. But I do have a good understanding of fire behavior, and I'm the only investigator available. Given the remote location of the cabin, there may not be another investigator on this fire, unless grounds can be established to bring in more resources. Grounds such as evidence of foul play. Or a body. I scrutinize the smoldering pile of tin and charcoal, searching for anything obvious.

Any clues are buried beneath the shroud of the collapsed roof.

Given the heat of the debris, should I let it burn out and cool before excavating?

It will be hours until the heat diminishes to a safe level, insulated as it is by the collapsed roof and debris that has caved in from the walls. Days even. I glance toward the truck, remember blackened keys dangling from the ignition. We can't wait. Chances are nil that anyone in the remains of the cabin might still be alive, but we have a responsibility to lay the question to rest. From a practical perspective, we need to know if a search is required.

I ponder how it might be safe to commence work.

Water in a fire hose is over two hundred pounds per square inch pressure. Even if we throttle down the pump, the jet of water will wreak havoc among the debris, mixing and damaging. Fire travel clues and other evidence are often subtle or delicate. We'll have to go in hot but controlled. I peer through the trees, to where Hendrigan and his men are working. I'd hate to pull them off fire suppression duties, but I'll need assistance. The smaller helicopter swings overhead and I look up at the large block

letters of its call sign, stenciled on its belly. I'll ask for the local crew to assist. Until then, I'll do what little I can.

First things first. More photos and notes. Site sketch.

By the time I'm finished, another half hour has passed. TRT is still flying. The dog is still whining. The cabin is still smoldering. I call TRT, confirm they haven't found any sign of the missing occupant and have them land at the new helipad, farther down the creek and outside the fire. I unclip the chain from the dog's collar. I don't have a leash for him and don't want him loose around the helicopter—the tail rotor will puree a dog. So I carry him, walk quickly, my eyes and nose running. He reeks of wet dog, burned hair and shit. Through the trees, the helicopter is visible, waiting, rotors buzzing. Someone is walking toward me, coveralls and hardhat glaringly clean, and I groan.

“Howdy, Porter.”

It's Luke Middel, the Chief Ranger's teenage son. Luke is tall and lanky, with a mess of blonde hair and a look of unbridled enthusiasm on his smooth face. Ever since my arrival to investigate the bottle fires, he's been begging me to follow along. It's like having a big, ungainly puppy stalking you. Luke must have been waiting at the base for his chance to hop a flight here, but the last thing I need, with a possible casualty, a possible crime scene, and a hot evidence search, is an uncoordinated and overly eager sixteen-year-old without any training. I thrust the dog at him, which he takes awkwardly.

“Here, Luke, I've got an important mission for you.”

“Yeah, but—”

“This dog is injured and needs medical care. You take him to the nursing station and make sure they treat him right.”

Luke fumbles with the dog, which squirms in his arms, looking back at me reproachfully for putting him in the arms of an amateur. Luke's hesitation is obvious—he's looking past me toward the fire. I fix him with a stern look and send him back to the helicopter. He slouches away, struggling with the dog. I assist loading them into the helicopter and once both dog and teenager are safely on board I give Arnie the thumbs up. As the machine lifts off I breathe a sigh of relief and return to the ruins of the cabin, where I examine the tangle of smoldering debris, look for the best point of entry to start

my excavation. I decide the front of the cabin will be best as the debris here is less cluttered. This is also the cabin's path of entry and exit and there may be evidence along this route disturbed by moving and shifting elsewhere.

I pull my leather work gloves snug and get started.

The area just inside the door has no floor and I spend about twenty minutes on hands and knees systematically probing the ash, find numerous nails, three metal coat hooks and a doorknob. The sun clears the treetops and in no time I'm sweating. The ends of the carbonized floor joists crumble as I brush them with my glove. Farther into the cabin, portions of the floor have survived but are buried beneath the heap of debris. Jagged edges of tin halt further exploration. I stand and stretch, half-damp coveralls chaffing as I move. There isn't much more I can do until my helpers arrive, but I'm not much for standing around, so I start to work at the easily accessible sheets of tin, the metal warm through my gloves. The sheets of twisted metal move reluctantly, scraping with a sound like fingernails on a blackboard, but soon I've cleared enough roof tin and debris that I can progress my search several feet further into the building, where I see the black metal side of what I think is a small woodstove. I take pictures, then step across the ashy threshold into what was the front room of the cabin, my heart beating a bit faster—the woodstove may be the origin.

Floorboards are deeply charred and still smoking. Something sizzles and pops beneath the debris. Just in front of me the side of the stove is fully exposed, tilted on an angle. It's a simple wood heater—a cube of heavy sheet metal with a door in the front. Warped roofing tin, round metal stove pipe, chunks of charcoaled log beam and other debris prevent a complete view of the stove, but from the aspect of the stove's door hinges, it looks as though the door may be open, which could be the cause of the fire—coals having spilled onto the wooden floor. Or the stove door may have been knocked open as the cabin collapsed on top of it. Either way, I'm anxious to have a better look and begin tugging at more sheets of tin.

The tin is tangled with other debris and I succeed in shifting portions of the pile, but little more. Something buried begins to sizzle more aggressively. A length of stove pipe rolls out at my feet and I pick it up, give it a cursory examination, set it aside. Something far more interesting has been exposed—the end of a Whiskey bottle, laying on

the black pillowed surface of the floor. I squat, pick away bits of charred wood and gently blow away ash. The bottle is broken, but the base is intact. Gingerly, I pick it up, my scalp tingling, expecting to see the familiar letters inscribed at its base, but there is nothing on the crazed, cobblestone texture of the tortured glass. This appears to be an unrelated fire and a picture begins to form in my mind. Lone occupant drinking Whiskey, leaves the cabin door open, perhaps as the stove has made the cabin too hot. Or he goes for a piss and forgets to close the door, as he does with the stove when he feeds in wood. The occupant is asleep or passed out when an ember falls from the stove, igniting the floor. My scalp tingles again—the odor of the smoking debris has a pungent undertone similar to meat burned on a barbecue. I grasp a sheet of tin and pull hard, hoping to uncover the stove and surrounding area. It moves about two inches. Another try yields another inch—the tin is either tangled solidly in the pile or still connected to something heavy. Instead, I pick a sheet of tin further down in the pile and, putting my legs into it, heave upward.

The weight is considerable—it feels as though I'm lifting the entire roof—but the pile shifts, scraping and groaning. A blast of hot air hits me in the face, rancid and filled with smoke and swirling ash. I wince, close my eyes and let it pass, then heave once more. An opening forms beneath the pile of debris and what I see puzzles me. A charred log with blackened branches lying on the floor—a vivid pink stripe where the bark has pulled away. Then a strong odor hits me, of burned cloth and flesh and I realize, horrified, that the log is a body and the missing bark is skin and clothing, burned to the tin and pulled away from the corpse as a result of my lifting. I see teeth and vacant eye sockets and for a few seconds all I can do is stare, no longer aware of the weight of the debris, the muted hiss of fire or the sounds of the helicopter. Then it all rushes back and I drop the weight and stagger away, gagging, my arm blazing with pain. Blood roars in my ears. Burned trees ahead of me seem to bend and swirl.