

WILDFIRE

A NOVEL

Rodman Philbrick

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Many thanks to my hotshot friends, Eric Metcalf, David Carr,
and Teddy Bryan, for their fascinating accounts of fighting wildfires
in the Bitterroot, in Montana.

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1.

When Trees Explode

We wake up to the smell of smoke. At first it isn't too bad, but then the smoke starts to sting and makes our eyes water, and by the time breakfast is over, the counselors say a decision has been made. The fire is still far away enough that we can't see it yet, but to be on the safe side, Camp Wabanaski will be evacuated as soon as the buses get here.

The smoke is getting worse, a layer of stinky fog that dims the sky. Except along the horizon, which is suddenly flickering orange above the treetops.

Wildfire, moving fast.

"The buses have arrived!" a counselor shouts. "Grab your gear and board! Remain calm but move quickly!"

We're only allowed one bag, so I jam everything into my hiking pack.

I'm on the second step of the bus, tight in a line of super-excited campers, when I remember my phone is still on the charger. I need it to call Mom and let her know I'm okay. I manage to sneak off without catching the attention of the staff, scoot around the buses, and race back to the cabin.



Sprint down the trail, by the tall white pines clustered around the sign for Camp Wabanaski, “A Summer Experience.” Turn left at the intersection for Lake Path, then right on Cabin Path, and there it is, dead ahead, my cabin.

Inside, the smoke is even thicker. My throat is starting to burn, like I gargled something nasty.

Phone, phone, where’s the phone?! Should be on the rickety table next to the wake-up radio, but it isn’t.

Should I run back to the bus and hope for the best? Answer: yes!

Then I spot a phone under the table. Blue rubber case, labeled with my name, Sam Castine. Grab it up, slip it into my back pocket, and bolt. Screen door slamming like a gunshot behind me.

Whoa! Serious smoke! The buses are no longer visible through the trees, it’s that thick. But I don’t need to see the buses, I know my way back to the entrance area where they’re parked. I have a really good sense of direction. My dad used to say I was born with a compass in my head. Not that I need a compass. All I have to do is follow the trails, Cabin Path to Lake Path, and I’ll be there.

What stops me is a flash of heat. Feels like an oven door has opened over my head. I look up and see something astonishing. The cluster of tall white pines blooming orange flower blossoms from the top. No, that’s wrong. Not flowers. Flames. Flames pouring from branch to branch like a gleaming



waterfall of fire. Fat flaming drops dripping on the grass below the pines, igniting it instantly.

The pines explode and disintegrate. A wave of flame erupts from the base of the tree trunks, setting up a wall of fire between me and the buses. A wall of fire that wants to kill me.

There's only one thing to do.

Run the opposite way.

Run for my life.

