

## Burningham Fire

She was sitting on the edge of a large rock, blue eyes scanning the stony ravine below as she tied her blonde hair back into a ponytail. Shadows from the trees above her danced across the rock in a warm breeze and gave her brief moments of shade from the hot sun. Adjusting her hiking pack, she huffed and dropped down six feet to the stones below, starting her trek down into the canyon. Water trickled in a light stream down the center of the canyon, a sharp relief against the scalding hot air. Light sparkled across its uneven surface like fire, only halting as her shadow passed over its surface. The ends of her jeans dampened as she crossed the stream to a ranger's box. She quickly unlocked it and hoisted the lid up.

"Graced by the company of books..." she muttered, picking up the books she had requested the previous week.

She grabbed the rucksack of food and tucked it into her pack, taking one last look into the box before shutting and locking it. Starting back up the canyon wall, pale stone turned to tall trees as she made her way through bushes back to her watch tower. The windows were all wide open, filtering out the hot air inside for the equally hot air outside, though providing a view she had yet to stop staring at. A lake sat a few miles away, the river hidden slightly behind the ocean of green trees that stretched as far as the eye could see. The mountains waved slightly in the heat, a speck of brown on its side reminding her of the other watch tower looking over their valley.

Since she arrived at her duty station three weeks ago, this had become the routine; wake up, drink coffee, stretch, then begin the hunt for that week's drop-off box. Her first week had been lucky. They had chosen the ranger's box next to the campgrounds down by the lake. Her second week, however, she had not been so lucky. She had to hike around the entire lake to the

practically-abandoned maintenance shed left by the local Girl Scouts troupe. After the main cabin burned down three years prior, they had left the place untouched.

“Tower 7, come in.” A female voice came through the radio on her belt, startling her out of her thoughts. “I see you in there.”

“Definitely not creepy, tower 8,” she said, shaking her head.

Tower 8 sat near the peak of one of the mountains north of her own tower, distant but visible with the lights on at night. The woman at tower 8 had taken up that post a day before her and had been rather pleased to hear that another woman was at the nearest tower to her. She had mentioned the previous year she had been stationed next to an older man that ranted about the wonders of nature and how the “youngins” of her generation were missing out. He hadn’t seemed to realize that the woman he was talking to was one of said “youngins.” It hadn’t been a good year, it seemed.

“Anyone can see you with that big head of yours.”

“Hardy har.”

“What’s in your load this week?”

She looked down at the rucksack and began pulling things out, “The remainder of the *Lord of the Rings* series, more coffee, dried goods, and…” She paused. “Ooh, whiskey. Someone must like me.”

“Perhaps,” Tower 8 responded. “I figured it’d be good to celebrate surviving three weeks out in the boonies. Most go crazy without the Internet and service out here.”

She snorted, “Yes, well, when you’re mourning your husband’s death, you don’t need the Internet.”

Silence.

She frowned, shoulders sagging. She had almost forgotten why she was here, why she had taken a position as a fire watch in the middle of nowhere with minimal human contact and weekly food drops. How could she have forgotten? She settled herself into her desk chair, ignoring its creak. The funeral felt like months ago and his death... his death felt like *years* ago. She supposed she had plenty of time anticipating his death considering he had spent the last three years of his life in and out of the hospital fighting cancer, but she still felt her stomach sink. It was as if the moment she had stepped into this forest, time had started moving so much faster.

She stared at the small picture of her and her late husband sitting in the corner of her tower, "I feel horrible," she said. "It feels like I've moved on so quickly. It's only been a month since... since his funeral and... I've already forgotten why I'm here."

Silence, then, "It is why you're out here, to move on."

She blinked, "I suppose so. It just feels so wrong to move on so quickly."

"It just means where you're going is the right place."

"I guess."

Pause, "How about we start that celebrating, hm? I can't go down there, but I'm still here."

She smiled, "Alright."

"Great! Now," She popped the bottle open. "Would you rather... never have ice in any drink or always have ice in every drink?"

"Easy. With this heat, always ice."

"Right, right, too easy."

"How about... would you rather..."

Bang!

She shot up in her bed, gasping in shock. She glared around the room, searching for what had caused the noise, but found herself alone.

Boom!

The watch tower was suddenly filled with momentary light as colorful sparks flew in the sky beyond. Fireworks. She cursed and rolled out of bed, quickly changing into her uniform before hurrying down the metal steps of her tower. Three more had gone off, each one turning the night sky into brief daylight and illuminating the dry grounds below. Smoke filled her nostrils as she jogged down the path towards the lake.

Bang!

She broke through the edge of the trees to find a group of teenagers on the beach, their laughter and shouts echoing all around her as she moved towards them.

“Hey!” She called out, watching as they turned to here. “Stop lighting those fireworks!”

“Why should we?” one of them, a boy, slurred out as he pointed his partially full beer bottle at her. His short spiky hair was tousley and messy as if he hadn’t slept in a few days.

“You’re not my mom!”

“We are in fire watch season. So either pack it up, or I will call the forest service to kick you out.” She stopped at the edge of their little circle, another firework propped into the sand in the center of them.

This time one of the girls, looking much less drunk, piped up, “Who even are you? Why should we do what *you* tell us?”

“I am part of the fire watch. Now, either pack up the fireworks, or I confiscate them and call the forest service with this neat little walkie talkie,” She moved her hand to her hip, emphasizing the walkie talkie clipped to her belt.

They all looked at each other before looking at her again, the drunk one talking, “We aren’t doing shit for you. Now scram before we light up more than just a firework.”

She narrowed her eyes as the boy, shaking her head as she pulled the walkie talkie off her belt. *Please be awake.* “Base, this is tower 7, I have a group of teenagers down by Lake Danwell lighting fireworks. They have refused to stop and have threatened me.”

The group looked at each other again as, after a moment, a voice came through, “Tower 7, this is base, we read you. Back-up should arrive in about 10 minutes.”

“Copy.”

She tucked the walkie talkie back onto her belt, eyes never leaving the group.

One of the girls glared at the drunk boy, “Look at that, you idiot. Now we’ve got the fucking forest service coming down. Why couldn’t you have just kept your mouth shut?”

His face reddened and he opened his mouth to speak but tower 7 spoke first, “Alright. Either we stand here waiting for the forest service to come all the way out here to arrest you, or you hand over your fireworks, ALL of them, and walk away and all of this will disappear.”

They all shifted uncomfortably, glancing between each other. The first boy said, “She must be lying. She’s just trying to ruin the fun.”

The same girl scowled, “That’s an actual radio, dumbass. Let’s just pack up.”

“No! We spent all that money on fireworks,” he shook his head. “We’re here to celebrate! It’s the Fourth of July!”

“Just give her the damn fireworks, Jason!” The girl nearest girl smacked his arm, which held another firework.

The boy, Jason, glared at her before tossing it onto the sand and stalking off into the darkness. The two girls glared after him before starting to gather up all the fireworks. The third girl of the group went after the boy, coming back after a minute with a few more fireworks and looking very flustered as she dumped them into the large bag they had carried the bundles in. They scooped up the bag and handed it over.

She smiled, “Good choice.”

She spun on her heel and started the trek back through the trees to her tower, the bulky bag bumping awkwardly against her side. She made it all the way to her tower before pulling her walkie talkie to her mouth again.

“Thanks for the back up, tower 8. Teenagers were thoroughly spooked.”

“Damn teenagers. Glad that we could spook them into cooperation.”

“Yeah.” She changed back into her pajamas. “All of them looked tipsy, if not drunk, I bet that helped.”

“Oh, even better. A bunch of drunken teenagers breaking the law.”

“Yup. Good night, tower 8.”

“Night.”

She tucked the bag into one of the cabinets and flopped onto her bed, instantly passing out.

The sun was high in the sky as she settled herself on a smooth stone by the river, easing her pack off her shoulders and taking her shoes off to stick her feet in the water. She dug through her pack for a moment and found her peanut butter sandwich, instantly taking it out of the little Ziploc and digging in. The cool water felt good on her feet and washed away the sweat of the morning's hike.

Halfway through the sandwich, she pulled out her tower watchbook and a pen, jotting down what she had seen thus far. Someone had tried to stack some rocks halfway down the canyon and caused a minor rock slide, damaging one of the fences blocking the way to an old mine. It would need to be repaired. There were still bits of the fireworks from those teenagers a few days ago, but none of them had caused any fire. A new group of people had replaced the teenagers. She estimated it to be 4 people from the number and sizes of tents pitched. There was no campfire spot set up so she could only assume they were following the fire watch notice, but there was that possibility they had just pitched it that morning. She would have to check tomorrow.

She found a random shirt hanging from a branch down by the beach. She left it there, figuring that one of the teens had abandoned it in their rush to leave. It was amusing how a little act was enough to scare away a group of teenagers. They hadn't noticed the radio wasn't a long-distance one, or at least a long enough distance one to reach "base." Hell, there technically was no "base," just the ranger station 10 miles away.

It reminded her of her high school days when things were simpler. She and her friends had taken a trip like those teenagers had, up into the mountains. One of her friends had discovered a hot spring waterfall that made a series of three different pools, each featuring its own level of heat. They had lucked out that day and were the only ones there so they did what

any group of teenage girls would do by themselves; skinny dipped. It hadn't exactly been the brightest decision they had made. She knew now the risk of all sorts of infection they could've gotten. But it had been new and exciting and none of them had cared. They were up in those pools for at least an hour when their fun had been interrupted by another group arriving. It had been a mad-dash to get their clothes back on before the family could see them.

It had technically been illegal. The state had banned public nudity of any type on public lands. But again, they hadn't cared. It had given them all a thrill with the rush of adrenaline. None of them wanted some old dude to see them naked. They had still been minors, which would have put them in a very awkward position too. That had been enough to get them to pack up everything and rush back to the car, leaving the family alone.

She wished she could go back to those days, and she could almost imagine it. Perhaps without being naked in the middle of nowhere. Maybe settled into a hot tub with friends, laughing and telling fun stories and sipping any sort of alcoholic beverage. She had heard of people setting up projectors in their backyard so they could sit in their hot tub or pool and watch movies.

"Hey, tower 8," she spoke into the radio, having already forgotten about her half-eaten sandwich and her paperwork.

"Yes, tower 7?"

"Have you ever watched movies in a hot tub?"

Tower 8 laughed, "Not what I was expecting, but no. Why?"

She smiled, "I was just thinking about how some people do that. I don't know. Maybe it's something to try when we go home for the winter."

"Sure." There was a pause. "I don't have a hot tub."



“Neither do I.”

Tower 8 laughed again and she couldn't help but join in.

When she had received the report, they had said she wouldn't be in any danger. After all, it was way out by Tower 2. By day three, she had received word that towers 1 through 4 had been evacuated. Now, on day five, they would be evacuating towers 5 through 8. She had heard that this wildfire, poorly named the “Burningham Fire,” was the fastest spreading fire in nearly 30 years. It was hard to think that she was stuck in this tower, watching that black smoke fill the air until the sky turned a pale gray that even dulled the surrounding greenery. She could see it creeping over the mountains to the west, the flickering lights of the distant fire caused by teens she herself had reprimanded what felt like weeks ago.

Sitting here on the balcony of her watchtower, legs dangling between the splintering wood rails and heat beating down on her, she was once more reminded of her childhood. The stench of smoke had become a deep familiarity, starting small fires to keep themselves warm on cold nights. She remembered the long days spent sitting on the edges of sidewalks with her mother, holding cardboard signs in hopes of drawing someone's attention, and the moments of being choked by the smoke from fancy cars that sped away. Sometimes she thought she could smell it in her laundry, though she knew those days were decades behind her.

Yet, here she was, watching a fire unlike any she had ever seen creep towards her and fill the once bright blue skies with that all too familiar stench. It was sickening. She had to remind herself that she wasn't in those days anymore, standing and beginning her rounds through the

forest and by the river in hopes of chasing away the memories of what *had* been. She couldn't change the past, she knew. After all, if she could, she didn't think she would be here at all.

The next morning, she was awoken by the sounds of helicopters. Her radio was buzzing in her hand as she stood and stared out at the devastation beyond. Fire licked at the trees at the opposite end of the lake and turned the once beautiful green into an array of reds and oranges. Smoke had turned the sky a deep gray and the lands beyond that thick cloud were black and burned. Death in its most obvious state. Humans could always pretend that a person wasn't dead. In those first minutes of a person being dead, a person could imagine the body was alive, just asleep, but *this*... this was death, and death was rapidly approaching what she had believed was her safe place.

"Tower 7, come in," a male voice came over the radio, startling her out of her thoughts.

"This is tower 7."

"Rendezvous at Crescent Point by 1200 hours. Officers will be waiting for you."

"Copy that." She shoved the radio into her waistband and glanced at the fire again.

With a glance down at her watch, she jolted into motion. 1100 hours. She had packed all of her belongings the previous night, though she found herself staring around the watchtower as if searching for something to grab. She looked at the bookshelf, at the collection of books that had helped her escape the world, and thought they looked forlorn as she hoisted up her bag onto her shoulders. With a shaky breath, she hurried out of the room. The wood all around her seemed to creak and groan as she rushed down the steps and into the forest, coughing as the smoke filled her lungs. It must be coming around the lake already.

Three miles.

She felt disoriented, the trees blurring as if she were moving much faster than she actually was. She lost her footing twice as she scrambled up a stone wall and nearly slipped as she reached the top, her shaky hands proving dangerous rather than an inconvenience. In the blur, she spotted the familiar lichen-covered rock that marked her trail. She glanced at her watch. 1120 hours.

Two miles.

The smoke was thick in the trees, the breeze sweeping through them only carrying more smoke and heat until she felt drenched in her own sweat. Through the smoke, the familiar tree with the dry-rotted red tape came into view. 1140 hours.

One more mile.

Just one more mile.

The climb to Crescent Point was treacherous and harsh, a sharp cliff side rising up above the trees. She slowed her pace and tried to steady her trembling hands to avoid slipping and falling. As if by a miracle, her head poked over the edge as she hoisted herself up onto the stone landing.

She had made it.

She stared around the flattened peak of Crescent Point, the wooden guard rails rotted with time and the ground left untouched. Not many made the effort to reach the peak and she understood their reasoning. But the view... oh, the view was worth her shuttering, gasping breaths. She could see so much further than her watchtower from here. Away from the fire, she could see the rolling hills of trees and lovely greenery. There were no birds, the fire and smoke

had long since chased them away. The pale yellow of the canyon carved like a snake between the trees, bold and beautiful.

But towards the fire, it was carnage. The fire had, indeed, begun to wrap around the lake in the hour of her trek. The neon orange and black was a stark contrast against the green of the untouched trees. She felt her heart sink. She really would never see those books again. Her family treasures. She wished she could have packed him. She didn't care that they would have weighed her down, slowed her, maybe even caused her to miss her ride out of the valley.

But where was her ride? Shouldn't it have been here already? Had she taken too long? She glanced down at her watch and saw it had stopped working at 1143. The heat must've broken it. It made her stomach drop. What if she had taken too long? What if she were to be stuck out here, out in this heat and smothering, clouded air? Was this how she was going to die? She had wished for something better than this, to maybe die in her sleep as her husband had. It was a bitter thought. After all this time, the one thing she had grown used to was going to kill her. She had spent all these years growing accustomed to the smell of burning things and now she was going to die from something burning. How horrible.

She thought of him, then. Of his chiseled jaw and glowing smile. Of his cheeky remarks and gentle touch. He had loved her deeply, even through the last rough years of his life. It had been too late when he had been diagnosed. Despite this, he had wanted to stick around, to see her, to tell her he loved her. He made sure she was happy even when he wasn't. She had been his world.

Perhaps, if she could get out of this, she could start anew. She felt a wave of guilt as she thought of the time since his death. Every moment of every day up until the day she arrived in this forest, she had wept. She had only seen the shadows of the world. Every minor

inconvenience had been devastating. It hit her hard at the realization that this... this wouldn't be what he would want for her. He would want her to move on, to be happy, to remember him but for the good times, not the bad. The bad days had been terrible, sure, but the good days... they were wonderful.

A noise came through her thoughts and drew her out of the depths of her mind, forcing her to blink the blur out of her eyes. A dark mass was growing closer and closer, the sound growing louder and louder until she had to cover her ears. The helicopter landed and a man hopped out, helping her to her feet and grabbing her duffle. He guided her into the helicopter, putting a pair of headphones on her and shoving her bag in a compartment. He said something into his microphone and it rang through hers, but it sounded distant.

This wasn't the end. She wasn't going to die here. She really could move on.

She looked out of the open side of the helicopter and down at the destruction below. It was truly a sight she would never forget. Miles of blazing fire and blackened trees that she knew, one day, would flourish once more.

Someone touched her arm and she jolted, turning to the person sitting next to her. It was a woman, her black hair pulled into a dusty ponytail and tanned skin smeared with ash. Her dark brown eyes studied her face, brows furrowed with worry.

"Tower 8?" she said and the woman nodded, smiling ever so slightly.

"They picked me up first. It's why they were running a bit behind with you."

She blinked at the dark haired woman and felt a wave of relief. She hadn't even thought of her distant friend in all of this trouble.

"And I think it's about time you started calling me Natalie."

She stared into those brown eyes and felt a flare in her heart, “Well, Natalie, I’m Ella. It’s a pleasure to finally, really meet you.”

“How about we rent out a hot tub when we’re back on land?” Natalie grinned.

Ella laughed, tears of relief and joy leaving streaks through the ash on her face. It was time to start over and, for the first time since her husband’s death, she felt ready to with a friend like Natalie by her side.