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## Controlled Burn

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**Controlled Burn**

That Friday, I was Bill Allen. I was Bill Allen all that summer. Bill Allen was what caused me to jump every time the phone rang. I was Bill Allen from Glens Falls, New York, and I was taking a summer off from college. I repeated that story as often and as loudly as possible. And each ring of the phone might be someone asking me to prove I was Bill Allen, which was out of the question. Back in December, in the middle of another, different lie, I tried to rob a gas station near Cape May, New Jersey. It was off-season then, nobody around, and I thought it would be easy. It fit the person I'd lied about being. A high-school girl was behind the counter. I wore a ski mask and carried a cheap, semi-automatic pistol. I must have touched the trigger, because the gun went off. Maybe she lived. I really couldn't say. I left fast. My brain was on fire, I hadn't meant to shoot her. But it was too late for that. I took a roll of bills and ended up at Robert's. Robert paid cash at the end of the week, didn't bother with Uncle Sam, didn't ask for references and had plenty of backbreaking work that needed doing, without his son around to help him. Bill Allen was just the man for the job, and every day, I was Bill Allen to the best of my ability. It didn't help my grim yesterdays cast the longest shadows in the Connecticut River Valley. I watched every car, studied every face. Bill Allen never knew a peaceful day. If it hadn't been for the marathon workload Robert demanded, Bill Allen never would have slept. I'd have probably shot Bill Allen myself, if I hadn't been working so hard to keep him going. Some days, he lives on with different names. Allen Williams, Al Wilson, Bill Roberts. Bill Allen probably died in a fire that summer. Leave it at that, with questions about Bill Allen.

It was a bad winter and a worse spring. It was the summer Bill Allen lived and died, the sweltering summer I landed a job

cutting trees for Robert Wilson's scab-logging outfit near Orford, New Hampshire. June boiled itself away into the heavy steam of July. Heat devils rose in waves off the blacktop as timber trucks rolled in. By the end of July, we switched gears and started cutting stove wood. I was cutting eight cords a day while Robert worked the hydraulic splitter. Then we'd deliver it in one of our dump trucks. Some men drove to woodlot to pick up their own. Some of them had white salt marks on their boots and jackets from sweat—some of them smelled like beer. Most of them smelled like gasoline. They didn't say much, just paid for their wood and left with it in their pickup trucks. They were either busy working or busy living their lies, which is work in itself. I knew about that. The hard work crushed one empty beer can day after another, adding to my lifetime pile of empties. Summer moved on, gray in spite of the bright sun.

The phone at the woodlot rang around noon that Friday. I heard it, had been hearing it most of August. Robert's son John was in jail in Concord, awaiting trial for murderous assault, so there were a lot of phone calls. Robert had rigged the phone with two speakers—one bolted to the stovepipe that stuck out of the roof of our headquarters shack and the other attached by some baling wire to the sick elm on the end of the lot. The sudden scream of the phone spiked my heart rate at least twice a day. Echoing in the alleys between the giant piles of long logs. The woodlot sat surrounded by low, field-grass hills and trees in a natural bowl, just off the highway north of Hanover. Robert's house was on the top of the hill, built with its back to the woodlot, facing a farm field. On a still day, the beauty of the Connecticut River drifted the quarter mile over the farm field and quietly framed all the other sounds, the birds, the trees in the breeze. I was never a part of those days.

The phone rang over the diesel roar of my yellow Maxi-lift, the near dead cherry picker we kept around to police up the

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yard. I was working, sweating in the sun, busy shifting a full twelve-ton load of New Hampshire rock maple to the very back of the drying mountains of timber, heat against next year's winter. The phone rang again, not that anyone wanted to talk to me. Most times, I'd shut the equipment down, run across the yard, slam into the shed, pick tip and get "Robert there?" and they'd hang up when I said no. Or they wouldn't say anything, just hang up when they knew I wasn't Robert. And I could breathe again, because it wasn't someone looking for me. Just locals, as if I couldn't take a wood order. Or it would be the mechanical jail operator, would I please accept a collect call from inmate John Wilson at the Merrimack Correctional Facility. Then I'd say yes and have to go get Robert anyway. Nobody wanted to talk to me, and I didn't want to talk to anyone, so I let it ring. Robert would get it. Or he wouldn't. They know where to find me, he'd say. Working in the same place for thirty years, if they can't find me, what the hell would I want to talk to them for, he'd say. Must be stupid if they can't get hold of me. Robert's voice was a ton of gravel coming off a truck, years of cigarettes mucking up the inside of his barrel chest. There was no sign at the dirt road entrance to the woodlot. It was Robert Wilson's woodlot and everyone knew without asking.

Robert came out of the shed and waved at me to shut the cherry picker down. I flipped a switch, turned the keys back a click and cranked the brake on. I walked over to the shed. Robert had his jean coveralls on. He squinted against the sun, nodded and spoke.

"That was Frank Lord. He wants his wood tomorrow."

Robert took twenty-five dollars out of his pocket and handed it to me. That was our deal—fifty dollars if I had to work on Saturday, twenty-five up front. "You can fix his load today."

I nodded. "What does he get?"

"Two cord, plus half a cord of kiln dried."

Robert had converted an old singlewide trailer into a kiln and most of his customers ordered mixed loads of both air and kiln dried. Kiln dried wood burns hotter than air-dried. Mixing a kiln dried log in with every fire produces more heat, allows the air-dried wood to burn more efficiently. People with woodstoves got as much heat out of two air-dried cords mixed with half a cord of kiln dried as people who burned four straight cords. When a single woodstove is the primary heat source for a whole house, each log has to do its job. Robert charged more for the kiln dried and nobody kicked about the price.

I took my Texaco ball cap off. "If you don't want it mixed, we'll have to take two trucks." Lord's farm was thirty-five miles north and slightly west, just on the Vermont side of the Connecticut River, near Newbury. The river came straight down through the Northeast Kingdom and just past Wells River, it made an oxbow, flowing briefly north in a u-shaped collar, before returning to its southern course. Lord's Farm encompassed all of the oxbow, stretching from Route Five all the way east to the river, which was the Vermont New Hampshire border. It was the most beautiful spot on earth, the most amazing fields and woods and sky that Bill Allen had ever seen. Robert and I had driven past once that summer, on the way to Wells River to pick up a chain saw. Looking out of the truck as we drove up Route Five and seeing Lord's white farm buildings and fields, I thought maybe I could make it through Bill Allen and still have a life, somewhere. On the way back, the view of the green fields sweeping out into the bend of the river made everything stop. I didn't hear the engine of the truck, nor the gears. We floated along the road as my mind took picture after picture, of the farm and the fields and the blue sky with the sun setting. That bend in the river. I came alive for a minute and as the farm slowly passed by, I died again, back into the zombie lie of Bill Allen.

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Robert was talking to me, shaking his head. “He’s got some extra work. Tobe can drive the small rig.”

Tobin lived south of the woodlot, in White River Junction and did odd jobs for Robert. Tobin’s wife was as big as the house they lived in. He didn’t have a phone—if Robert needed him for something, I’d drive down first thing in the morning and pick him up. Just pulled my beat-up Bronco into his doorway and sat there till he came out. Sometimes, a thin, white hand would appear in the dirty window, waving me away. Too drunk to work. He lived in a culvert on the woodlot for about a month when things got tough with his wife. He was skinny as a rail, hadn’t showered in about a week, month, year. His teeth were broken brown stumps and his fingers were stained from tobacco. But he could cut and stack firewood faster than two men, and at half the price.

“I’ll pick him up in the morning,” I said.

“That’s okay. I’ll get him tonight and let him sleep on the porch,” Robert said. “I want to make sure he can work tomorrow.” He walked back inside the shed. I fixed Frank Lord’s load of wood for the next day and went to the loft of a barn I called home.

Next morning, I was at the woodlot at five-thirty. It was pitch black. Robert was already there, sitting in his pickup truck, drinking coffee and eating a hard-boiled egg. He had the running lights on. I drove slowly over to the open driver’s side window.

“Thought you overslept,” he said.

I climbed out of the Bronco and got into the big white rig. Tobin got behind the wheel of the small one. Robert was driving the big rig.

The floor of the white rig was taken up with logging chains. The last job Robert had used it for was a semi-commercial haul and he’d left the chains in. He had a whole barn full of them

up by his house. He'd load them in the truck and then get weighed, toss them out at the job and then leave them there. The customer paid the difference. How many people paid for those chains, only God knows. The fuse box was open on the passenger's side, so that any metal that jumped up during the ride could cause a spark or worse. It made for a tense ride.

We started the drive up to North Haverhill on the New Hampshire side of the Connecticut River. It was beautiful. The sun began to shine. The truck could only make thirty-five fully loaded. Tobin was always right behind us, with the flashers on. Robert wrestled the gears up a hill. Then he lit a cigarette and spoke.

"When I was fifteen, I ran away and ended up on Frank Lord's farm." He looked over at me.

"I didn't know that," I answered.

"Frank Lord worked me so hard I thought I was going to drop. But it straightened me out. Best thing that ever happened to me."

"What was wrong with you?" I asked.

"Bad temper," Robert answered. "Bad temper and drinking." We passed a broken down barn.

"At fifteen?"

Robert nodded. "Back then, fifteen was like thirty-five. You had a job, a car—they made you live life back then and if you didn't like it, get the fuck out." He took a drag off his cigarette. He was silent, smoking, for the rest of the ride.

Frank Lord was standing in his driveway as we pulled up. He looked as though we'd just been there yesterday. He had an oxygen mask on and a green tank marked OXYGEN in white letters standing next to him. The fields stretched out behind him all the way to the river. The big white farmhouse behind him needed a coat of paint. There were a couple of barns and buildings. They needed paint too. Parked alongside of the main house was a brand new pickup truck. On top of the main

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house was a black wrought iron weather vane, the silhouette of a big black stallion. The weather vane pointed north.

“What are you going to do, make something out of yourself or what?” His voice was muffled behind the clear plastic mask. His breath made it fill with mist. He pointed over toward the nearest barn. “Put it over there,” he said through the mask.

“Don’t mix it together.” He and Robert walked slowly toward the main house and sat on the porch in kitchen chairs. Tobin and I unloaded and stacked the wood. Tobin worked fast. His stacks were the straightest I’ve ever seen. His face seemed frozen in a perpetual grin as we worked in silence. The stacks came out perfectly. We went back over to Robert and Frank on the porch. It was just around noon.

“We’ve got some other work to do,” Frank said. He held out a piece of paper.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Yesterday, in the morning, Judge Harris stopped over here. Unofficially. I’ve known his family for probably, oh, fifty years.” The breeze tossed the tops of the corn. “He told me that the State Police got a tip I was growing marijuana. They were trying to get a warrant to search my house and my fields.” He held out the paper. “Harris dropped this off.” I read the paper. It was a one-day special permit for a controlled burn.

“What do you want us to do?” I asked.

“Burn it, all of it. Right back to the river. I don’t want a single thing left alive.” He stared at the perch and then looked straight at Tobin and me. “Just in case there’s a little Mexican hay that got mixed in with my corn somehow.”

Robert came down off the porch to supervise. He and I rigged up a sprayer with some gas and soaked a good portion of the front field. We left a wide strip in the middle completely dry. Then we drove the tractor through a thin line of trees and there was a huge cornfield that stretched all the way to the river. In the middle of the field, probably six hundred yards



away, was a small white shack. Robert spoke up.

"That's where my first wife and I lived." He looked at it.

I looked over at him. "I never think about you being married."

He nodded. "Well I was, for a while." He pointed his chin at the shack. "People that live in places like that don't very often stay married." He stared at the white shack. "I had a bad temper then."

I nodded. "Should we burn it?"

"Oh yeah." Robert wiped his forehead with a red kerchief. Sweat had run down from his forehead and got into his eyes and on his chin.

"What if there are people in it?" I looked over at the shack.

"Then fuck 'em, let 'em burn. Their name isn't Lord and they don't belong on this property." Robert spit into the field. "Frank said burn it, and that's what we're going to do." He looked across the rows of corn toward the river. "Hotter than Hades." He looked over at me. "You'll never be cold again, after this." He started to drive the tractor toward the white shack with me on the back of his seat. "Here, watch this," he shouted over the tractor.

We pulled up next to the shack. The windows on the one side had been broken, but the chicken wire in the glass remained, rusted from the weather. I heard a faint hum.

"Watch this," Robert said. He took the nozzle from the gas sprayer and aimed a fine stream at the window. I saw some wasps beginning to fly out of the broken window. Robert pointed his chin at them and talked above the noise of the tractor. "Wasps," he said. "They're the worst." Some moved slowly, clinging to the chicken wire. I could see their insect heads, sectioned bodies and stingers. They were getting soaked with gas. "Throw a match," Robert said.

"No," I said. "It'll explode." I pointed at the sprayer and the tank of gas on the tractor.

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“Gas doesn’t burn,” Robert said. “It’s wet—nothing that’s wet can burn. It’s the fumes that burn.” He took a wood match out of his pocket and struck it on the tractor, then tossed the small flame into the gas spray.

The air groaned and came alive with fire. The wasps were flying full-bore out of the broken window now, right into the wall of flame and through it. Their wings were on fire, still beating, the air currents lifting them up in the heat even as they burned to nothing. A flaming wasp landed on my work shirt and I smacked it into the corn. Now they were all over, burning and flying. Stinging anything they touched. One lost a wing and kept flying, a coin-sized flaming circle into the corn. I watched one come out of the window whole, coated shiny with gas. It flew over the corn, its wings caught fire and kept beating as the body burned to a cinder, the wings still going until they vanished in tiny ash. Robert smacked some wasps off his arm and backed the tractor up, driving over to the river.

We soaked the corn next to the river and then sprayed it a little thinner up on the bank. “The fire will seek the gas,” Robert said. “That patch we left in the middle will burn slower than the rest. We’ll be all set.”

We decided that the best way to do it would be to have Tobin drive the truck around to the New Hampshire side of The Oxbow. Then I’d light the fire from the riverbank too, so that the onrushing flames wouldn’t somehow jump the river. Robert drove the tractor back through the field, leaving me standing right on the bend in the river with a box of matches. I could barely see the white shack over the corn. The river ran behind me, softly laughing its way over the rocks. Everything was still and my heart almost stopped panting for the first time in a long time. Bill Allen stood on the riverbank and knew he needed to die. He knew he had to go back to the place he was born and answer for the crime that fathered him. I heard the air horn blow from the big rig, Robert’s signal to me that he

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was clear of the fields. As I lit the corn on fire, Bill Allen decided to throw himself into the blaze.

The flames grew fast and I jumped out into the Connecticut River. It must have been cool, but I didn't feel it. The heat from the fire seemed to reach across The Oxbow and right through the water. I climbed up on the bank on the other side just in time to see Robert's white wedding shack take the flames full force. The walls and roof caught like they were made of rice paper and in the next instant, the shack was gone. The fire was so hot, so intense, I couldn't look at it. I walked farther up on the bank and Tobin was there with the small truck. I got in and we started to drive back toward Vermont. A black cloud grew in the air of the beautiful blue horizon and we watched it for miles. It seemed as if we'd permanently smudged the sky.

When we got back to Lord's farm, Robert was busy fending off several local volunteer fire companies, who had arrived with sirens and lights going. He just kept showing them the permit Judge Harris had given to Frank. Tobin and I stayed in the small truck. At one point, I swear the flames in the field were higher than the farmhouse. Tobin backed the truck up so the windshield wouldn't crack. I finally got out and sat alone in the passenger's side of the big rig. I fell asleep. It was late that night when Robert climbed in to drive and slammed his door, bringing me straight up in my seat. The fields were still burning and all I could smell was smoke. We drove slowly back to the woodlot and I slept there in my Bronco. The next day—Sunday—I was going to drive all day and turn myself in. Bill Allen was dead.

The screaming echo of the phone over the woodlot woke me. I saw Robert go into the headquarters shack to answer it. He came back out shortly, still in his coveralls, and walked over to the Bronco. I got out. He handed me a Styrofoam cup of coffee and pointed his chin at the Bronco.

"Comfy in there last night?" he asked. I nodded and he

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went on. "That was John on the phone. He's going to plead out tomorrow and take two years." Robert shook his head. "Anyway, you've got tomorrow off. I'm going up to Concord to be at the sentencing." He reached in his pocket and pulled out a roll of bills. He handed it to me.

"What's this for?" I said.

Robert narrowed his eyes and looked at me. "Do you need it or not?" His voice was the hardest love I'd ever felt. I nodded. He turned around and started walking back to the shed. I watched him close the door. I climbed back in the Bronco and headed out onto the highway. I drove north, and crossed over into Vermont. There was still a huge black cloud in the sky over The Oxbow. I drove up Route Five and looked out over the burnt fields, still smoldering, scorched dead. Lord's farm looked gray from the smoke. I drove up into the Northeast Kingdom. I never did find the courage to turn myself in and things got worse. I spent the winter at a logging camp in Quebec.

I called once, when I hit a jam out in North Dakota. I called from a phone booth outside a diner. I recognized John's voice the second he spoke. I hung up. Later, much later, in another life, with another name, we were driving and someone handed me a road atlas. I flipped through it and found Vermont and New Hampshire were together on the same page. I started tracing their shared border, the Connecticut River, north toward Canada. I dropped the atlas when my finger reached The Oxbow. For just that split second, right on the tip of my finger, the surface of the map was scorching hot. I heard the roar of the fire, the little white house burning. The air rushing to be eaten by the flames. I smelled the gasoline. Riding across the top of the fire on a black horse was Bill Allen. Three dark shapes followed swiftly after him, the burning wasps in their long black hair, chasing him. Catching him and

dragging him down into the fire, screaming.

Years later, on the security ward at Western State Hospital near Tacoma, I saw a man in a straightjacket, strapped to a gurney. I walked over to him and spoke.

"I didn't know they used straight jackets anymore."

He could barely move his head. "Well, they do." The smell of ether was everywhere. He was quiet as a white-jacketed doctor walked by. "Say, Mac, scratch my shoulder, will you?"

I slowly reached down and began scratching the outside of the thick canvas that bound him. Solid steel mesh covered the ward windows.

"Harder," he said. "I can barely feel it." He looked up at me. "I think they're trying to save on the heat. Aren't you cold?" I shook my head. "I'm cold all the time," he said.

I dug my nails into the canvas on his right shoulder. "My name is John Wilson," I said.

He looked at me, his eyes wide. "That's my name," he said softly.

I stopped scratching the straightjacket. "What's your middle name?" I asked.

He shook his head slightly and closed his eyes. "Same as yours," he said. He shivered. It was cold. But my paper gown was soaked with dry sweat and my face was hot. I could smell smoke.

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