



FIRE

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author of *The Perfect Storm*

FIRE

ALSO BY SEBASTIAN JUNGER

The Perfect Storm

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SEBASTIAN JUNGER

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*This book is dedicated to
Ellis Settle, 1924–1993*

Contents

Introduction

FIRE (1992)

BLOWUP: WHAT WENT WRONG AT STORM KING MOUNTAIN (1994)

THE WHALE HUNTERS (1995)

ESCAPE FROM KASHMIR (1996)

KOSOVO'S VALLEY OF DEATH (1998)

DISPATCHES FROM A DEAD WAR (1999)

COLTER'S WAY (1999)

THE FORENSICS OF WAR (1999)

THE TERROR OF SIERRA LEONE (2000)

THE LION IN WINTER (2001)

Acknowledgments

Introduction

In 1989, when I was in my late twenties, I saw a magazine photo of half a dozen forest fire fighters taking a break on the fire line. They wore yellow Nomex shirts and hard hats and had line packs on their backs and were leaning on their tools in a little meadow, watching the forest burn. In front of them was a wall of flame three hundred feet high. There was something about the men in that photo—their awe, their exhaustion, their sense of purpose—that I wanted in my life. I tacked the photo to my wall and lived with it for a whole winter.

It was an uninspiring time in my life. I was living in a grim little apartment in Somerville, Massachusetts, I'd quit waiting tables, and I had vague ideas of making my living as a writer. The only good thing I had going on was an intermittent job—more of an apprenticeship, really—working as a climber for a tree company. I'd met a guy in a bar who showed me an enormous scar across his knee from a chain saw accident, and offered me a job. He said he'd teach me to climb if I worked for him whenever he needed someone. I agreed. I climbed trees over houses, trees over garages, trees over telephone lines. I climbed trees that were twenty feet high and swayed from my weight; I climbed others that were 150 years old and had branches so big that holding them was like hanging from the neck of an elephant. Some of the trees had to be taken down; some just had to be pruned. All of them terrified me. I learned to work without looking down. I learned to work without thinking too directly about what I was doing. I learned just to do something regardless of how I felt about it.

Ultimately, I hoped that the work I was doing might lead to a job fighting wildfire. I knew that chain saws were used on fires—one of the guys in my photo had one over his shoulder—and I thought that maybe if I showed up

out West with my saw, I could get onto a crew. With fires that big, it seemed that they might take anyone they could get.

That turned out to be emphatically untrue. Forest fires are as much a job opportunity as a natural calamity, and there is a lot of competition to get onto the crews. I made some calls and was told that I had to work for a couple of years on a secondary crew before I could even apply for a full-time position fighting wildfire and that even the secondary crews were hard to get onto. I also needed a “fire card,” which meant that I had to pass a training course, but it admitted only people who were already working in one of the government agencies involved in wildfire. I gave up on the idea of fighting fire and stayed East to continue working in the trees.

As jobs go, climbing was hard to beat. I got in very good shape. I lost my fear of heights. I started making very good money. I would bid on jobs, subcontract out the ground work, and do the climbing myself. The amount I made depended on how fast I worked and how well I priced the job. I made two hundred dollars a day, five hundred a day, a thousand a day. Some days I climbed with such confidence that I almost felt that I didn’t need to use a rope; other times I was filled with such clumsy fearfulness that I could hardly get off the ground.

My experience as a climber culminated one clear, cold November day, when the owner of a tree company asked me to give him a price on a very dangerous job. A large tree had split down the middle, and the bulk of the tree was still balanced in a tiny piece of trunk. Working in a tree like that would be risky because it was unstable, and if it came down unexpectedly, the climber would almost certainly be killed. I walked around the property, looked at the tree from various angles, and told him, “Five hundred dollars.” He shrugged and agreed. It wasn’t worth five hundred dollars to go up into that tree—it wasn’t worth any amount—but I saw another way to do it. On either side of the property were two taller trees that were roughly lined up with the one in question. I climbed both of the taller trees, set up a tension line between them, clipped into it, and pulled myself hand over hand until I was directly over the tree that had to come down. I rappelled down into it and began working. If it fell out from under me, I was still safe. I limbed the tree out and then dropped the trunk in sections. It took two hours. At the time it felt like the best thing I’d ever done.

Inevitably I was going to have an accident—almost every climber I knew had—and mine came while I was pruning a small elm in Wellfleet,