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ONE FOOT IN THE BLACK:
A Wildland Firefighter's Story
Unpublished manuscript

A determined loner battles both California wildfires and memories of a difficult childhood.

All Greg Kowalski, a teenager from Saginaw, Mich., ever wanted was a sense of family. His volatile father, a Harley-driving firefighter, demeans Greg and his younger sister Vicky with verbal attacks and physically abuses their quiet, deferential mother. Throughout his adolescence, Greg dreams of escape but nurses a desire to connect with others. Upon graduating from high school, a captain at the fire station offers Greg a chance to enter a training program at the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, an opportunity that Greg hopes will impress his father. A curt, heartless dismissal from his family leads to a cross-country bus ride and a strenuous apprenticeship learning the skills required for fighting fire in the brush. After the gig ends, Greg drives south to Malibu, daring to survive the notorious four-week training camp required to join a fire-suppression unit with the LA County Fire Department. Life in the academy is brutal, but it is here that Greg begins to discover the family he never had: fellow trainee Luis Zambrano, who dreams of a better life for his wife and newly born child; Hector Wells, a rootless Native American with years of service as a firefighter; and Capt. Tom Bratton, a gruff yet kindhearted superior who takes a liking to Greg, offering home-cooked meals and sage advice. An unpredictable wildfire in the middle of the dry season, raging over the hills north of Los Angeles, gives Greg plenty of firsthand experience but tests his resolve and dedication to the profession. Kamm, whose considerable research lends the novel a keen sense of verisimilitude, structures the narrative by unfolding two storylines at once: one tracking Greg's budding career and the other exploring the gloomy events of his childhood. While the pedestrian prose detracts from the effectiveness of the story, Greg's efforts to shake loose of his past make for a compelling, fast-paced read.

A turbulent, thoughtful story of putting out fires, both personal and professional.

