

CAROLINE COONEY

Flash fire



Flash Fire

Caroline B. Cooney



Contents

No Trespassing

Pinch Canyon Wednesday, October 27th

The Press House 3:15 P.M.

The Brushfire 3:16 P.M.

The Press House 3:20 P.M.

The Brushfire 3:21 P.M.

The Aszling House 3:23 P.M.

The Severyn House 3:25 P.M.

Grass Canyon Road 3:30 P.M.

The Press House 3:30 P.M.

The Brushfire 3:35 P.M.

The Severyn House 3:38 P.M.

The Brushfire 3:38 P.M.

Absolutely No Smoking

The Gatehouse 3:38 P.M.

Pacific Coast Highway 3:38 P.M.

The Brushfire 3:42 P.M.

Pacific Coast Highway 3:43 P.M.

The Aszling House 3:44 P.M.

The Severyn House 3:45 P.M.

The Severyn House 3:46 P.M.

The Press House 3:46 P.M.

The Health Club 3:46 P.M.

The Fire 3:57 P.M.

Los Angeles 3:57 P.M.

Los Angeles 3:57 P.M.

The Press House 3:59 P.M.

Residents Only

The Severyn House 4:00 P.M.

The Press House 4:01 P.M.

The Severyn House 4:02 P.M.

The Fire 4:02 P.M.

[Grass Canyon Road 4:03 P.M.](#)

[The Press House 4:04 P.M.](#)

[The Severyn House 4:05 P.M.](#)

[Grass Canyon Road 4:06 P.M.](#)

[Los Angeles 4:07 P.M.](#)

[The Severyn House 4:08 P.M.](#)

[The Luu Stable 4:08 P.M.](#)

[Arson Watch](#)

[The Aszling House 4:08 P.M.](#)

[Los Angeles 4:08 P.M.](#)

[Grass Canyon Road 4:09 P.M.](#)

[Grass Canyon Road 4:10 P.M.](#)

[The Aszling House 4:10 P.M.](#)

[Glass Canyon Road 4:11 P.M.](#)

[Grass Canyon Road 4:11 P.M.](#)

[The Severyn House 4:12 P.M.](#)

[No Outlet](#)

[Grass Canyon Road 4:12 P.M.](#)

[Pacific Coast Highway 4:13 P.M.](#)

[Grass Canyon Road 4:14 P.M.](#)

[The Severyn House 4:14 P.M.](#)

[Pinch Canyon 4:14 P.M.](#)

[The Health Club 4:14 P.M.](#)

[The Luu House 4:14 P.M.](#)

[Rock Slide Area](#)

[The Luu House 4:15 P.M.](#)

[Pinch Canyon 4:16 P.M.](#)

[Pinch Canyon Road 4:17 P.M.](#)

[Pinch Canyon 4:18 P.M.](#)

[Pinch Canyon 4:18 P.M.](#)

[Pinch Canyon 4:18 P.M.](#)

[Grass Canyon Fire 4:18 P.M.](#)

[Grass Canyon Road 4:20 P.M.](#)

[Pinch Canyon Road 4:21 P.M.](#)

The Severyn House 4:21 P.M.

Pinch Canyon Gate 4:22 P.M.

Armed Response

Pinch Canyon 4:24 P.M.

Pinch Canyon 4:24 P.M.

The Severyn House 4:24 P.M.

The Studio 4:24 P.M.

The Severyn House 4:25 P.M.

Pacific Coast Highway 4:25 P.M.

Grass Canyon Road 4:26 P.M.

Los Angeles General Hospital 4:27 P.M.

Grass Canyon Road 4:27 P.M.

Grass Canyon Road 4:27 P.M.

Grass Canyon Road 4:28 P.M.

Grass Canyon Road 4:28:30 P.M.

Grass Canyon Road 4:29 P.M.

Grass Canyon Road 4:29:30 P.M.

Grass Canyon Road 4:30 P.M.

The Studio 4:35 P.M.

Grass Canyon Road 4:55 P.M.

Grass Canyon Road 4:55 P.M.

A Biography of Caroline B. Cooney

NO TRESPASSING

Pinch Canyon

Wednesday, October 27th

The Press House

3:15 P.M.

ROCK SLIDE AREA

RESIDENTS ONLY

NO OUTLET

ARSON WATCH

ABSOLUTELY NO SMOKING

NO TRESPASSING

ARMED RESPONSE

A STRANGER WHO DROVE into Pinch Canyon would think he was entering a war zone. Danna herself would have removed the signs lining the road, and opted to *have* rock slides, strangers, trespassing, and, of course, armed response.

ARMED RESPONSE was Danna's personal favorite. She had never seen an ARMED RESPONSE, but she remained hopeful. Someday, uniformed responders carrying submachine guns and leading slaver dogs would vault out of a camouflage vehicle and surround one of the houses.

With her luck, she'd be in school.

Danna Press wanted action. Her very own mother and father had just entered a twelve-step serenity class. Please. Who would want serenity?

Danna felt she was an ideal candidate for a kidnapping. She could at least witness a major crime and then have to testify in court, or else provide vital information about an assassination attempt on the President.

Why, Danna wanted to know, could she not be a terrorist, or date one?

When earthquakes struck, why wasn't it *her* house that got lifted from its foundations and tumbled down down down into the treacherous canyon below? That way, television cameras would focus upon the Press family, the nation aching over their plight, and falling in love with the beautiful Danna.

But no. The Press family continued on its placid way, outgrowing jeans and renting movies.

Danna turned on the TV for company. Los Angeles (not her area, of course; she couldn't be there)

lucky) was engulfed in flames for the ninth day in a row. People are packing their Volvos with photograph albums, thought Danna, calling the dog, hosing down the roof, rescuing their neighbors. And what am I doing? Vocabulary.

“A conflagration!” said the reporter eagerly. Now *there* was a vocabulary word.

Danna studied the TV map. Nothing in the way of a conflagration was near Pinch Canyon. She watched the people watching fires. People had driven to freeway overpasses and brought binoculars and even lawn chairs from which to enjoy the fires at a comfortable distance. Since neither Danna nor her brother, Hall, was old enough to drive, and since their mom and dad checked on them about every sixty seconds, this was not going to be a possibility. They were stuck on Pinch.

Pinch Canyon, well named, was a slot in the mountains, as thin and vertical as a toaster waiting for bread. Twisted oaks and shrubs dusty with heat and lack of rain filled the narrow box bottom on both sides of Pinch Canyon Road. The south rockface flared almost straight up. It was the kind of rock that peeled itself off in layers after storms. Dangerous, impossible-to-climb rock, scarred by years of erosion.

The north face was where the houses had been built. Twenty-one houses were pasted on the canyon's few slanting meadows. Driveways curled as tight and steep as spirals on school notebooks. Swimming pools and tennis courts and paddocks for horses had been carved into the hillsides.

Most people shared a driveway. Three houses peeled off theirs: At the bottom was Danna's, Mom and Mrs. Luu lived in the middle, and stacked on top of them, the Aszlings. Everybody had a lot of land, but it was mainly vertical.

Pinch Canyon had no outlet. The road turned sharply off Grass Canyon Road, was blocked a quarter mile in by a gate, and then cut another mile and a half to stop dead at the foot of Pinch Mountain. Pinch Mountain looked like a five-hundred-foot sphinx glaring down the road, its huge paws forming the sides of the canyon. Most hills around LA were rounded, but her own person canyon was sharp and harsh, the sides dropping roughly — fifty feet here, a hundred feet there.

On television, a large stucco house, built in pastel stacks like huge children's blocks, slowly caught fire. Smoke came before flames, so first the house turned into a soot-breathing dragon. Then magnificent and horrific, it turned blazing gold. In minutes, only its black skeleton remained.

“You guys get all the good stuff,” Danna said to the television. “I'm stuck here with abdicate and abjure.”

Vocabulary ought to stay in elementary school. Sixth grade was the absolute oldest you should have to have vocabulary. Ninth grade was far too sophisticated for vocabulary lists. Nevertheless, she had a vocabulary list, one of those tricky ones meant to catch you by the alphabet heels. Abdicate, abjure, abhorrent, aborigine, and abstention.

Although Mom and Dad were at the studio today, fighting over a contract, they kept relentlessly in touch. There was no avoiding the family rule of Homework First. What with beepers, E-mail, fax

and phone, Danna and Hall never had a minute of freedom. Mom even wore a wristwatch that beeped at appropriate intervals to remind her to check on Danna's homework/clarinet practice/dance practice/tennis practice/horseback riding.

I'm sick of vocabulary, thought Danna, who sickened quickly over most homework.

She could go outside and swim with her brother, but the temperature was in the nineties and the Santa Ana wind was no relief: It cleaned out the lungs like a dry scouring pad. Because of the fires, the air was full of ash. Strange, particulate black ash. Not papery flakes, but little microscopic pieces of things, each different, like snowflakes — as if, with a microscope, you would know that one was from a roof shingle, another from a baby crib, or a birdhouse.

Anyway, Danna was wearing her favorite T-shirt, which was white, and she didn't want it to turn gray from the falling ash. It was from the Los Angeles County Coroner's office, featuring the outline of a human body, as if chalked by police on a street. It came down to her knees, making the chalk body about a quarter life-size. Mom and Dad said it was sick and tasteless, but since writing sick and tasteless screenplays was their trade, they had to quit arguing early. Danna always got a kick out of the fact that her strict, careful, and affectionate parents wrote stuff so sick that when it finally came on television, Danna and Hall weren't even allowed to see it.

"So okay," said Danna to the television, "I should feel sorry for the owners of that burned-up house, and their children, and their pets, and their insurance company, and I do, I really do. I really am a nice person and I do feel sorry when other people suffer. It's just that nothing happens to *me*."

Danna planned what she would take if she had to run from a fire.

Kittens first.

The stray cat she'd adopted had provided kittens. Everybody who walked into the house fell in love with the kittens, crooning and cuddling, but not a single kitten-adorer would actually take one home. The mama cat moved on and left all seven babies to Danna. Danna named the kittens for L.A. suburbs, so they had Pasadena, Burbank, Venice, LAX for the airport, and so forth. Her brother thought this was pretty crummy, a kitten named LAX, so he was calling the kittens by the names of fruit trees that grew on their property: Orange, Lemon, Kumquat, etc. Since the kittens looked alike, you couldn't tell which you were calling anyway, and Kumquat (or LAX) and Lemon (or Venice) just skittered around between your shoes trying to get you to fall over on one of their brothers or sisters.

Danna couldn't even guarantee there were seven kittens anymore, because getting them in one place at one time, even for meals, wasn't a happening thing.

Even though the fire was miles away, and would have to work its way through thousands of houses, cross major highways, step over hundreds of firefighters, and outwit dozens of tanker planes before it hit Pinch Canyon, Danna entertained herself by making kitten contingency plans.

The Brushfire

3:16 P.M.

FIVE MILES UP GRASS Canyon Road, and down a minor road that led inland and north of Pinch Canyon was an ordinary brush fire. It moved along casually, like a person bored with exercise.

What you wanted to do with fire was to kill it around the edges. The edge was its line of attack. So you put your trucks and your firefighters at the edge. You bottled the fire up until it ate the fuel and then the fire died.

A small troop of firefighters used long-handled Pulaskis, a sort of combination hoe and axe, to rip up the spiky brown underbrush, chain saws to take down trees, and shovels to turn dirt on top of this tinder and take away its oxygen. Everybody was a little bored, because the really neat fires were elsewhere, and they were stuck on shovel duty.

They paused now and then to sip water from canteens or Cokes from cans.

At this particular minute, they thought they were in charge.

The fire knew otherwise.

The Press House

3:20 P.M.

HALL WASN'T SWIMMING, JUST floating. From the air, their pool wasn't turquoise like everybody else's but dark and secret because the tile that lined the Press pool was deep green. They'd bought the house by helicopter, flying over to make sure of the neighborhood, so Hall knew exactly what it looked like from the sky.

There was a lot of air traffic today. Silver-and-red tanker planes skimmed Pinch Mountain, headed for distant fires to dump their gooey loads of red fire retardant on endangered hillsides. Bucket-fitted helicopters flew to the Pacific, filled up with salt water, and roared loudly back to pour water on roofs or yards. The copters were white with yellow tails and red-and-white-striped propellers, giving them the look of children's toys that actually flew.

It was a good day to float on your back and check out the sky.

Of course, the air was a little tough to breathe. Hall might as well have asthma. Every now and then, he had to go vertical, treading water and coughing.

Halstead Press loved the interval in his day that came after school and before dinner. This was when he felt most like a Californian: hot and tanned and timeless. No minutes. No hours. Just the moment.

Above the Press property, the immense Luu deck launched itself toward the Pacific Ocean. The last mud slide had taken away a good deal of the Luu property. Where once there had been a steep hillside, there was now a vertical drop. Mr. and Mrs. Luu had covered the bare dirt with huge blue

plastic tarps, so if it rained again, the dirt wouldn't get wet and slide out from under the entire house. The tarp was weighted down with sandbags so it couldn't blow away, and the sandbags themselves were linked by heavy ropes, so they couldn't fall to the bottom of Pinch Canyon. It was a long way and would be a very unpleasant fall, even for a sandbag.

Hall loved to swing himself up onto their deck (when they weren't home to know about it) by the sandbag ropes.

It was stunt man stuff and Danna filmed him every time. They planned to show the films to the parents in ten or twenty years when they were too old for their parents to punish them.

There were no gentle meadows around Pinch Canyon. You couldn't run up these hills. You had to crawl, or go sideways, and hang onto things. Naturally Hall crawled up the hills all the time, and slipped, and dislodged dead roots, and ruined his clothes. Once Hall asked Mr. Luu if he was worried about the mud or the fires.

"Halstead, my man," said Mr. Luu, who loved Hall's name, and said it was destined for a bronze plaque on a very important door, "what's to worry? If there's a fire, we rebuild. If there's a mud slide, we sandbag. And if we have to start over, then we do."

"Besides," said Mrs. Luu, "I want to redecorate anyway."

Above the Luu house were the Aszlings. Where the Luus had wedged in a stable and paddock, and the Presses had decided on tennis courts, the Aszlings had chosen garages. Their land was so steep that even the garages were terraced. The driveway split like fingers, so each of the four cars had its own smaller, steeper driveway. They had of course remote control for the garage doors, and their Jaguar slipped in and out, black and sleek and secretive as the jungle animal.

Mr. Aszling was in aerospace and Mrs. Aszling was in computers. They gave parties all the time and skied at their mountain place and traveled to the Far East and now and then even remembered Geoffrey.

Mr. and Mrs. Aszling had never had children but apparently always wanted them, and a year ago adopted a little boy from a Bucharest orphanage. It was all very exciting, but the little boy proved difficult. Perhaps nobody had hugged him enough in Romania, or even hugged him at all. Perhaps nobody had spoken to him, or let him be with other children, or eat a meal at a table. Geoffrey was just a silent little animal. He didn't improve much. He was not rewarding. The fun had gone out of the adoption, and if you could un-adopt, the Aszlings would have done it.

Hall loved Geoffrey Aszling.

There was something proud and brave in this solemn little boy that Hall respected so much. Inside Geoffrey were tortures and terrors. If you could see his soul, you would see a hillside ravaged and bare like the mountain, as if the color of Geoffrey's babyhood were sun-baked mud.

If he sat quietly with Geoffrey, and waited longer than Hall could wait for anything else on earth, Geoffrey would approach him. It was like feeding a wild bird. If every day you extended your palm

with the sunflower seeds, eventually it would sit on your finger to eat out of your hand.

He'd been reading up on childhood emotional disorders and gotten interested in autism. Geoffrey did not have this dreadful syndrome, but there was a similarity. Hall cared intensely about Geoffrey's inability to love and to be loved.

Hall's family was very huggy. Whenever anybody went anywhere, they hugged. Not just a passing touch, but a bear hug. Dad still kissed him good night. Mom liked to stand behind him and massage his shoulder blades and kiss the back of his neck. Hall knew that he and Danna had the original prototype Super Parents, and he couldn't stand it that twice now Geoffrey had lost the parent lottery.

Hall knew, through Geoffrey, that he wanted to work with damaged little kids. Kids who had been hit, or hurt, or endured war or slaughter or abandonment.

He also knew that it wouldn't pay anything, and his parents would have little use for a career that paid nothing. Secrets were funny things. With some guys, the secrets they kept from their parents were drugs, or drinking, or being gay. Hall's secret was how much he wanted to help the Geoffreys of the world.

Yesterday, he'd leaned on the Aszlings' bell until the maid answered. (He never knew these maids; they were never the same woman; perhaps they sent their cousins to work when they were sick of housecleaning; or perhaps the Aszling household was regarded as an entrée for all illegals of a particular South American town, and everybody took turns scrubbing the Aszlings' bathrooms or pruning their bushes.) Anyway, Hall ran in yelling "So, Geoffrey, my man, how was your day?" and Geoffrey, who liked to speak a single word alternate months, yelled back, "Hall, my man!"

Hall felt like a million dollars. He returned home triumphant, yearning to share this huge victory with somebody, but his parents thought Geoffrey was creepy, and they didn't like their fifteen-year-old son hanging out with a four-year-old, even though at the same time they were mad at the Aszlings for giving up and proud of Hall for bothering.

Intellectually, Halstead Press knew that fire raged in twelve different places around Los Angeles, but Hall was a person who thought about people, not events. He floated on his back, staring at a sky that was normally blue, shading his eyes to keep the ash out, and planning Geoffrey's progress.

The Brushfire

3:21 P.M.

FIRE CREATES ITS OWN WEATHER.

Around the firefighters up Grass Canyon, the wind became an invisible vortex, getting hotter and hotter, swifter and swifter. It had just become a tornado that nobody could see.

Without warning — or at least any warning the firefighters saw — the heat sucked the flames

skyward, into a sudden horrific wall of flame.

It's one thing to fight a fire around your ankles.

It's quite another to fight a fire a hundred feet tall.

The rules and the hope changed in half a minute.

They stopped trying to fight it.

They practiced staying alive until it moved on.

The Aszling House

3:23 P.M.

OF COURSE ELONY WASN'T allowed to smoke in the house. Mr. and Mrs. Aszling regarded cigarettes like an invasion of gangs bent on murder. Let her light up a cigarette and they'd be in there shrieking and fanning the air and shooing her outside.

Elony loved smoking.

You couldn't tell her it wasn't fun. It felt good, it gave you energy, it was your own private pleasure, and if she had to give up Spanish, she sure wasn't giving up cigarettes.

She stepped outside to have a cigarette. Elony flinched at the heat. She could hardly believe it was this hot. She felt a creepy prickle on her skin, as if she were freezing in the heat. These fires. It was awful, what was happening to this beautiful beautiful city.

Elony loved LA. It was so full of itself. She loved being part of the huge event that was LA: the huge event of everybody doing better. Elony was going to do better, too. She was going to get rich and drive a car and buy beautiful clothing that fit.

The key, she had decided, was reading. The big gap between her and the Anglos wasn't skin and wasn't green cards and wasn't height and wasn't even language.

The big gap was that they could read and she could not.

Elony was fighting her way toward reading, without the slightest idea how. There had been no school in her lifetime in her village. She had come to the conclusion that she had to get English inside her mind, not just on her lips. Today she would start thinking in English. All other thoughts she would push out of her mind.

It was killing her.

It made her blink and flinch and frown and twitch. Strangers must think she was getting a disease.

I am, she thought. English.

One entire side of the vast Aszling house was glass doors. A door cracked, enough for a head to poke out, but not enough to let the air-conditioning out. Elony had just washed every single one of those immense panes of glass, inside and out. She let smoke slowly leave her lungs as Chiffon's sneaky little eyes checked her over. Chiffon was Baby Geoffrey's nurse, not that Chiffon had even

once made the slightest effort to do a single thing with Geoffrey other than be sure he didn't drown the pool.

"I'm going out for a while, Elony," called the Anglo girl, car keys in her hand. Chiffon was prett in the borderline way that meant she thought more of her looks than other people did. She was probably going to have her nails done, or her hair. She was always taking a key to the best car the Aszlings had not driven that day, and going off on errands. Hers, not the Aszlings.

Elony tapped her watch. "Bus," she shouted at Chiffon. "You stay. I go." Elony had a two-hour bus ride down Grass Canyon, down the Pacific Coast Highway, and finally into LA. Sometimes the bus's air-conditioning worked and sometimes it didn't. Elony had exactly two more minutes left in her work day, and then she had to hustle down Pinch Canyon Road to get the bus at Grass Canyon.

"You can stay late, Elony," explained Chiffon, since Elony's life and plans didn't matter. "I have to do this stuff, it's important. I'll be back in an hour or two." Chiffon waved, as if a flick of the wrist made everything okay, and darted off.

"No, you stay!" shouted Elony. She raced back into the house after Chiffon, chasing her through the huge rooms and up the occasional wide flat step that divided one space from another. Elony hated how she didn't have enough English to go around for situations like this.

But Chiffon had had too much of a head start. Giggling triumphantly, Chiffon waved and drove off.

I hate you! thought Elony.

No cigarette would make her feel better about missing the bus. What was she supposed to do now? Leave the little boy alone in the house? The maddening thing was that Mr. or Mrs. Aszling would care only if somebody found out. They just wanted to *look* like good parents.

Nobody would pay her overtime for staying with Geoffrey. She had found out that Mrs. Aszling was breaking laws by paying her so little. She also knew if she mentioned it, Mrs. Aszling would fire her. If Elony missed the bus, one of them would have to drive her home. She knew from experience that instead of thanking her for staying with Geoffrey, they'd just be mad about the long drive.

Mr. and Mrs. Aszling had not bothered to learn how to pronounce her name. They never talked to her. Never asked any questions. Never said, "How did you get to the States, Elony?"

So she'd never told them about the civil war she had survived, the brutal hike over mountains, the fording of a river full of disease and corpses. How she had paid for that border crossing in a stinking airless truck: with her body. They never even asked how old she was.

Seventeen.

Here in America, seventeen-year-olds were still children. Not Elony. Elony scrubbed toilets, mopped floors, polished furniture, and ironed more clothing every week than her entire village had possessed.

The baby is not my responsibility, thought Elony, furiously stubbing out the cigarette. He

Chiffon's.

Elony didn't look in on Geoffrey. He would be exactly where Chiffon had left him, curled on floor pillows, sucking his thumb, watching for the zillionth time a tape of *Cops*. Geoffrey loved *Cops* as long as he was safely wrapped in his blankie.

The blankie drove Mr. and Mrs. Aszling wild.

It was three yards of velour, a gaudy vivid fuschia purple, from which Elony had meant to sew a bathrobe for herself, until Geoffrey adopted it. Geoffrey didn't like to meet strangers without his velour. Mr. and Mrs. Aszling never suggested repaying Elony for the cloth.

Geoffrey never moves anyway, she told herself. He'll be fine. He'll just lie there in his blankie.

Elony got her purse, an immense black carrier in which she kept her entire life, and left the house. At the top of the four-fingered Aszling driveway, in the shade of the thick pines, she lit another cigarette. In this appalling heat, shade made no difference whatsoever. Hurrying down the steep switchbacks, she passed the paddock behind the Luu house, where the two horses always frightened her, and then the Press house. It hurt her ankles to go downhill because it was so steep.

Down on Pinch Canyon Road, half hidden by the two-story green exclamation points of cypress trees, were Mexican yardmen waving, but not at Elony. They were hoping to get a ride with the Severyn boy, who usually obliged anybody fortunate enough to be in the right place at the right time.

Elony hurried, so as to be in the right place at the right time.

The Severyn House

3:25 P.M.

BEAU SEVERYN WAS BORED.

Everything about life and school bored him these days. He didn't want to be bothered. His parents regarded boredom as failure: It meant you weren't disciplined enough, or trying hard enough.

LaLa Land, they called this place. To Beau, "la la" meant frothy people who never stopped to think. Beau had never met anybody like that in Los Angeles. This was the thinking-est crowd on earth, how to get ahead, how to mold a better body, how to have a better relationship, how to score, earn, fight, win, get published, be a star.

Beau phoned his father at work, although Dad didn't like him to do that. Dad was in charge of network news advertising. Companies didn't like sponsoring disasters; they yanked their ads when the news was race riots or celebrity murder trials or baseball strikes or, in this case, fire. Dad was a wreck over the fires, but it wasn't the fires wrecking him; it was advertisers whimpering their way out of contracts. Dad was losing millions and he was ulcerated and crazed. "Yes, Beau, what is it?" snapped his father, implying that it had better be good. His father had no use for people, especially sons, who were not the best.

“Dad, the television says the fires are getting a little closer.” It was not the fires that worried Beau and it was not the fires he wanted his father to talk about. But he and his father did not have intimate conversations, or even conversations, and he could only recite, as his father did, the news.

“What did I tell you last night, Beau? Pinch Mountain is a firebreak. That little brush fire last year burned every twig. The whole wilderness back there is naked as a baby. In any event, the fires are miles away.” His father’s voice was raspy and tense.

Beau knew his father wanted a cigarette. Giving up smoking was killing Dad. He’d be better off risking lung cancer than getting this frantic. But Beau didn’t say so. Mom acted as if the most important thing in the history of time was Dad quitting cigarettes. When Dad took a deep deep breath Beau could hear through the phone, it wasn’t Dad schooling himself to be patient with his son; it was pretend lungful of friendly calming wonderful smoke.

“Dad,” said Beau, who had been up on that mountain with Halstead Press, fooling around, and knew that the result of last year’s minor fire was that the undergrowth this year was stronger and fuller than ever, “the mayor is ordering evacuations — ”

“Miles from you!” snapped his father. “What are you really asking me, David?”

David was his real name. Mom and Dad used it only in anger, never in love. It gave Beau the creeps, as if his real name were poisoned now and could never be used.

Beau avoided the topic of what he was really asking, just as the entire family had avoided it for so long. “If we had to evacuate the house,” he said finally, “what should we save? I mean — ”

He meant the box. The dumb stupid box on the mantelpiece that he thought about all the time now.

“Beau, your mother and I do not worry about earthquakes or fires. We take our chances. The odds are in our favor.” Beau’s parents did not approve of worry. If you had enough self-discipline and paid enough attention to the details, you could dispense with worry. Therefore it was against the rules for Beau to say that his life was evenly divided between boredom and worry.

“I know, Dad. I guess, just in case, I was trying to work out — ”

“If something goes wrong, Beau, I have faith in you. You’ll handle things. Now listen, I’m in a meeting.”

Beau hung up slowly and surveyed his house. Twelve thousand square feet, enough for a high school in some parts of the world. Each time the network paid his father more, his parents bought more house and more car to match. Beau loved the sheer size of it — room after room after room each a great spread of cool tile floor the color of sliced cucumber. Glass walls illuminated the dusty olive California hills and the indigo sky, backlit with California sun.

Except now, of course, when it was backlit by distant fires.

Outside, oak and pine, oleander and cypress leaned against each other, their branches and scenery interwoven. A reflecting pool filled the huge atrium, while the lap pool lined the highest part of the

property like a canal.

There were not many houses on Pinch Canyon because there were not many building sites. The Severyns had the most beautiful spot of all, said his mother, and although Beau did not agree with his mother on much, he agreed with her on that.

Beau went outside to check garden hoses. If fire came, he didn't care how much danger there was nor how foolhardy it might be: He was staying with the house. It made him feel wide-chested and great-hearted to make that resolution. He rather hoped he would have to defend his property, with a great blazing enemy to stave off.

The two maids and the two groundskeepers were leaving. The Mexicans paused, hoping Beau would drive them down to the bus stop. They didn't want to walk in this heat. The bus would pick them up on Grass Canyon Road, and two miles down Grass the road would intersect with the Pacific Coast Highway. From there they would sit stolidly for however long it took to reach their Los Angeles neighborhood.

It would have been impossible to live the way Pinch Canyon did and not have household help. What with careers and shopping, luncheon dates and fashion decisions, body sculpting and aromatherapy and relationship discussion, who had time to cook or clean? Beau's parents had no idea what a household chore was and certainly never expected their children to do one. They could not imagine washing their own car or doing their own laundry. Beau's mother would no sooner contribute to a school bake sale than swim in a storm drain.

His parents were fond of their children, but on the side. Like a sauce they might not want on their food, they tasted it.

Halstead and Danna Press referred to their parents as SuperMom and SuperDad. Beau privately referred to his as SemiDad and NeverMom. He liked them. If he, too, were a grown-up, he'd enjoy their company and be friends. But they were not actually parents in any sense. They were beautiful rich people who maintained a beautiful house in which they kept children who had better be beautiful too.

Poor Elisabeth did not meet the guidelines. Last week, Beau's mother lamented to her women friends, "How could Aden and I, of all people, turn out a knock-kneed, nearsighted, overweight, boring little girl?"

"Mom, don't talk like that about Elisabeth," said Beau afterward. "Lighten up. She's only eight. Give her time."

"Beau, darling, these are my friends. They understand. I need understanding. You don't know how difficult it is, a daughter like that. Let me describe to you what I had in mind."

Elisabeth was never going to be what Mom had in mind.

"Would you like a ride to the bus stop?" Beau asked the help.

They nodded. There were never conversations with the help, just orders and nods.

“Wanna play tennis?” he asked his sister on the way to the garage. Tennis was an essential skill in their circle. He was always trying to tutor Elisabeth in the essentials.

“You’ll beat me.” Elisabeth invariably took that view: Why do anything; somebody will beat me. Mom of course hated having a daughter so lacking in drive and self-discipline.

“You need practice, Lizzie. I’ll be back in five minutes.”

Beau took the Suburban. His parents had bought it on a whim, immediately hated it and never touched it again. Everybody else had bought English: Land Rover or Range Rover. Beau loved the Suburban. With room to ferry a small band and its equipment, or else half a sports team, it was high off the road, heavy but easy to maneuver, and the driver had a great view and tons of power.

He picked up two more yardmen trudging down Pinch, and honked as he approached the gate. He wouldn’t have to slow down. The guard was poky opening up, and Beau had to come to a full stop. He made sure to glare at the guy to let him know he’d better not cause this problem on Beau’s return.

Grass Canyon Road

3:30 P.M.

MATT MARSH WAS THE happiest, most excited twenty-two-year-old in the great state of California.

It was the big game. And he was on the team.

He was wearing a new helmet, since the old one had melted fighting yesterday’s Altadena fire and he was using, of course, a new hose, since the one he had held to save his own life had also melted.

Matt referred to the fires in sports terms: The score, for example was: 100,000 acres burned, 24 houses destroyed, 44 casualties, no deaths.

In some weird way, Matt was cheering for the fire.

He was awed by it. Stunned by it. Fascinated by it. They were fighting it hard and relentlessly and yet it was winning: Winning so brilliantly, he could only admire it. It was like getting beaten by the world champion: There was a certain valor even in defeat.

He was gleeful about his army’s numbers: 85 engines, 30 bulldozers, 31 water tenders, 8 aerial bombers, 7 helicopters.

And one huge awesome spectacular lethal fire.

And that was just Grass Canyon! There were another ten or so fires elsewhere. Matt, like most of the firefighters, was mutual aiding. Each town offered its services and equipment to the neighborhood that needed them most. Matt, however, knew this part of LA well: He’d grown up a few miles south of here, in Pinch Canyon.

Command knew that Grass would be tough to defend. Where there were houses, of course, people soaked lawns at night with sprinklers, and so the gardens and grass were green and lush and somewhat

damp. But above the houses, Grass Canyon rose rather gently to three- and four-hundred-foot heights covered by shrubby, weedy growth that was thick, sturdy, and very very dry. Previous fires had not touched it. Mud had not slid down it. Grass Canyon was just thousands of acres of tinder.

Therefore, the critical objective was to hold the fire north of the wide asphalt break of the road itself.

They did not have a hope of actually putting the approaching fire out. It was mammoth and man-sized, driven by maddened wind. The fire was not neat. It zigged, it hopscotched, it doubled back. There were few places actually to set up lines of defense.

Bulldozer teams were hitting the west, seaward, flank of the fire, to keep it out of the adjoining urban areas.

The only thing June's crew could do was try to save houses and lives.

"Great," said June sarcastically. She was his captain. The first woman in this fire department she'd gone through a lot. She was medium in every way: medium high, medium wide, medium look — but first in guts. "I see four more jerks up on roofs with their garden hoses. What do you bet we get to that hydrant on top of the hill and there's no water pressure? They've sucked it all up."

The newest trend — wet roofs. What did they think they were accomplishing? If they'd kept the brush away from the house and had a tile roof instead of wood shingle, they'd have a prayer. But as they were now, these roof-wetters, were jerks.

In fact, this neighborhood looked as if the Homeowners' Association had said: "Be sure to collect logs, pieces of plywood you might need someday, bales of hay and, of course, full gasoline cans. The way when the fire comes, your house will *really* explode."

"Listen, buddy," shouted Matt, "you need to get out of here."

"My house is my life," shouted the man right back.

"Life is life," said Matt. "Houses are houses."

This sounded profound to Matt, but it sounded stupid to the homeowner, who made a rude gesture and went on wetting his house. Matt shrugged. The fire department could do a lot of things, but could not rope adults like cows at a rodeo and remove them from their own personal rooftops.

What he really could not understand were the crowds. Tourists from the neighborhood. Tourists from the other side of L.A. Disneyland let's-do-a-fire-instead tourists.

He would have thought the heat would drive them away. It was ninety degrees by itself, and with the fire approaching it felt like a hundred and ten. Or even a hundred and fifty. But there they stood bare armed, bare legged, dripping sweat, and the smoke collecting in their sweat so that they turned muddy, and they didn't care. It was very windy. Combine Santa Ana winds with the fire's own weather and you had a gale. People just laughed and took pictures of each other with the fire as backdrop. Whoever sold disposable cameras was having a great day.

It was sort of like a party, with fire gossip instead of divorce gossip. "Laguna Beach has lost over

three hundred homes,” said somebody, gloating because she didn’t live in Laguna Beach.

“Altadena’s even worse,” said somebody, bragging because she did live in Altadena, but in paved citified area where it was unlikely the fire would reach.

June had been on the handy-talkie. Matt loved those; he loved all the equipment that went with firefighting. “Which houses you assigning us?” asked Matt.

She shook her head, meaning it was up to her crew. “Choose winners,” said June. “Get houses you can defend and set up on ’em.”

Choose winners.

Matt Marsh’s parents certainly did not think they had raised a winner. They had brought him up to be a winner, all right: a corporate leader or a fine attorney who also played tennis and sailed. What was this firefighter crap? It made them crazy. They’d given him a Maserati for his birthday, to entice him back into the world of large incomes. As a firefighter, however, Matt couldn’t afford the kind of neighborhood where people drove hundred-thousand-dollar cars. He was in the kind of neighborhood where people ripped them off, and took the wallets and possibly the lives of their drivers. So the Maserati sat, a glittering high velocity reproach, in his parents’ garage on Pinch Canyon.

Matt Marsh wanted to win. He wanted to make saves — a house or a garage, but preferably a life. He wanted to show his mother and father that he had worth. There was no greater act than to rescue another human being.

Because of the hundred-and-fifty- to two-hundred-foot-high flames along some parts of this fire, Command expected significant civilian and firefighter injury. Nice word, “significant.” It meant “lots and lots.”

A medical branch had been established: five paramedic units and ten ambulances. Available hospital beds had been inventoried.

Matt thought of the danger, and hoped and hoped and hoped that he would be right there when it came.

The Press House

3:30 P.M.

DANNA WAS THINKING ABOUT when she babysat for Geoffrey. She didn’t like it. He didn’t sit in your lap when you read a picture book to him, he wouldn’t answer when you chatted, and he didn’t kiss back when you kissed him good night.

What sitting for Geoffrey really was, was heartbreaking. You kept thinking that *this* hug would change him. *This* tickle would make him giggle and *this* kiss would make him beam at you. But affection didn’t make a dent in Geoffrey.

You couldn’t even accuse Mr. and Mrs. Aszling of neglecting him, although they did. Geoffrey

neglected right back. He didn't have a personality, and after a while you didn't think of him as a little boy, just a breathing thing up there in the house.

She glanced at her watch, and sure enough, the 3:30 where-are-the-children-and-are-they-using-their-time-well phone call came through.

"Hey, sweetie," said Daddy. "How was school? You have a good day? Started your homework yet?"

"It was okay. We had fire drills. Boring. I'm hanging around doing vocabulary. Don't you think there should be legislation against vocabulary?"

Her father laughed. "What's Hall doing?"

"I think he's swimming laps."

"Tell him to do his chemistry."

"Daddy, he *knows* to do his chemistry. At some point, you have to let *us* decide when to do what."

"Tell your mother," he said, and they both laughed, and air-kissed and hung up. Danna forgot her father completely and instantly.

If there's a fire, thought Danna, Hall would save Geoffrey.

She loved the image of her older brother saving a life. Hall was a funny combination of jock (horse climbing, off road biking) and dreamer. It was nice to have a brother only a year older, to pave the way and make clear what mistakes, teachers, and people to avoid.

Hall saves Geoffrey, she decided, and I save the kittens and I'd better also save Egypt and Spice.

Egypt and Spice were the Luus' horses. Every day Danna saved her school cafeteria apples, walking on up to the paddock to give Egypt one half and Spice the other.

She got an apple ready, and a laundry basket for the kittens, and paused briefly to take in the news.

News never seemed possible to Danna, especially LA news. No matter how awful LA was made to look on network news, for people like Danna, who actually lived here, LA remained flawless. Killings, gangs, fires, riots, unemployment — they weren't *her* LA. Her LA was sunny comfort, horse colors, and cool drinks.

Danna had been to New York City a couple of times and could not believe people lived like that. Dirty and cold and grim. Crowded and mean under a gray sky and without flowers. And they were so superior about it, too. As if LA were nothing but a herd of automobiles and airheads gone amuck.

Indeed, on television, the Pacific Coast Highway was crowded with fire-fleeing automobiles overflowing with possessions and people, even horses tied to bumpers, which Danna would certainly never do with any horse. The cars themselves were jousting with official rescue vehicles (and winning because the trucks were following the rules and the cars weren't) — indeed, LA was nothing that afternoon but automobiles gone amuck. Danna switched the nonsense off. Okay, now what about my stuff? she said to herself. Everything in my bedroom?

Should she rescue her Nancy Drew books? (Of course she was much too old to read them now but went on buying them to complete her collection.) Her mother's girlhood collection of *Cherry Ames*, *Student Nurse* books? (Danna had never read them, since the mere thought of hanging around sick people made her sick, too; Mom said that Cherry Ames hardly ever spent any time with sick people either, since she was far too busy solving mysteries and meeting handsome men.) Her pink sneaker collection? (Mom had bought Danna pink sneakers since size newborn, and Danna had saved them all. She had dozens.)

Then it occurred to Danna that she and Hall had no car. Mom had hers, Dad had his, and the garage was empty. So the matter of pink sneakers and nurse novels was solved.

We'd ride Egypt and Spice out, she thought. She envisioned herself with kittens in her arms holding the reins, while Geoffrey sat in Hall's lap and they galloped over fire and flame.

What a film.

She would have to remember the camcorder. It would be great footage.

The Brushfire

3:35 P.M.

A LITTLE BITTY FIRE, like a campfire you built in the wrong place, you just buried with dirt, killing the oxygen. For a bigger fire — a dead tree burning — you needed a chain saw to cut the tree down and then the shovel to dig up some dirt and bury your tree in a pit. A fire that was above you, moving from treetop to treetop, gave you time to make your moves and calculate what to do next.

But a fire that belongs to the wind, or makes the wind — that fire moves as fast as the wind because it *is* the wind.

Your ax, your chain saw, your shovel — they don't stop a fire whirl any more than a teaspoon empties a swimming pool.

The firefighters east of Grass Canyon stood where the fire no longer was. Orange flames led them behind at an incredible rate of speed. The earth under their feet after-smoked, the way when an earthquake is over, it after-shocks.

The fire did not burn toward Grass Canyon Road, where there were crews and equipment waiting for it, but into the wildness that lay so astonishingly close to such a huge metropolis.

The crew stumbled toward their truck to get on a radio and let Command know what had just happened: An ordinary fire had just become lethal.

But everybody in Los Angeles was on a frequency at that moment. Fire engines and ambulances from fifty towns, either under threat themselves, or volunteering to help their neighbors, sheriffs and the Red Cross and volunteers and commuters in their thousands and thousands of cars, highway patrol and paramedics, news stations and auxiliaries and command posts...radios, pagers, cellular, and hard

wired telephones were overloaded. This transmission did not go through.

The Severyn House

3:38 P.M.

WHEN BEAU DROVE OFF, Elisabeth ran down the switchbacks of their steep driveway to hide from him.

Elisabeth, unlike Beau, could not care less about their house. It was a great big sterile place. You could houseclean inside with a garden hose; it was no different from the pools and the atrium. What Elisabeth loved was the bottom of the driveway.

There, where the oaks curled up in huge dark fists and the ferns grew as high as her waist, fallen rocks from some ancient mudslide formed a triangular hidey hole. It was too dark to read there, and Elisabeth was a reader, books by the armload, so she didn't stay long when she visited, but it was her secret and she went there most days for a minute or two. In the hidey hole she was safe.

Safe from her parents' disapproval.

Safe from remembering that she was never going to have flaxen hair and blue eyes and a winning smile.

Her mother did not know what to think of Elisabeth's reading. When Mom caught Elisabeth with a book, she said Elisabeth had no life; she was substituting books for a real life. Mom might even say that Elisabeth had no friends and was trying to turn paper and print into a friend. Elisabeth did not have friends, and it was terrible, and the only thing more terrible was her own mother accusing her of it.

If Beau was home, it would be okay, because Mom adored Beau, who was well named. Beau would distract Mom, and Elisabeth could slip away. But when Elisabeth was alone with Beau, it was bad in another way. Beau had decided that he was his sister's Only Hope. He would tutor and train and teach and coax and bribe until she was up to standard.

Some other time, Beau, she thought, ducking into the ferns.

The air was awful. She hated these dumb brushfires; it hurt to breathe. It turned the sky ugly and left a litter of ash on the swimming pool surface.

She had a pack of Sno Balls, her favorite junk food: cupcakes whose thick rubbery pink icing could be peeled off in one piece and stand on its own, like an igloo, while Elisabeth ate the inside.

Beau didn't know about the hidey hole. He was not the type who crept around hiding in woods and thickets. He was the type who sought, or who was given, limelight. What did limelight mean, anyway? Why not lemonlight, or orangelight?

It was very dark in Elisabeth's hidey hole. And even though she was annoyed with the fires for giving her a cough, she was not thinking about fires. Brushfire sounded to an eight-year-old like something you would brush away, something on the floor you'd sweep up with a broom. Who would

be afraid of that?

If the world did turn orange and lemon, Elisabeth Severyn would not know until it was too late.

The Brushfire

3:38 P.M.

THE FIRE SUCKED IN oxygen. It turned into a white and yellow avalanche, shrieking both up and down the sides of hills, eating not just grass and not just brush, but anything living or lifeless in its path, eating paint off cars and melting handles off doors and burning antlers off deer.

It was traveling at the incredible speed of twenty miles an hour. Unless stopped, slowed, or blown backward, the safety zone between the inferno and Pinch Canyon would last only fifteen minutes.

ABSOLUTELY NO SMOKING

The Gatehouse

3:38 P.M.

THE AFTERNOON GREW HOTTER.

The houses on Pinch Canyon and Grass Canyon preheated like ovens, growing closer and closer to the temperature that would make them explode.

The air-conditioning in the tiny gatehouse failed. Alan Davey sat gasping for breath. He had to wear a uniform, because they liked uniforms on their help, these rich Pinch Canyon people; it made them feel pampered and special.

Alan Davey hated his job. He had meant to work in fine restaurants and become a television chef, but he'd failed. Failure was fine in California as long as it was a step to success. But Alan Davey was no chef. Short-order cook, maybe — fried eggs and pancakes — but not great food. The Californian dream had not come true for Alan Davey, and he was too tired and hostile to try again.

Being a residential guard should have been momentary, until he got on his feet again, but Alan Davey never found his feet again. Whereas everybody on Pinch — young, middle-aged, and old — had never been *off* their feet. He especially resented the teenagers, so casually sure of themselves, driving cars that cost more than Alan Davey would earn in years.

Beau. It might be pronounced Bo, but it was short for beautiful. That's what lived on Pinch Canyon. The beautiful people. And Alan Davey's life was so low now that he had to smile, and remember names, and leap to open the gates for a spoiled brat named Beautiful.

He wouldn't mind at all if these people lost everything.

Not that it would happen to them. They would laugh — fine white teeth surrounded by perfect golden tans — and rebuild bigger and better in the exact same place, because nothing on earth could affect them in the end. The guard wanted something to affect them.

When the air-conditioning failed, he thought, That's it. I quit. They're on their own. Who needs this?

He got his car (hidden behind pines so its age and lack of style would not offend Pinch Canyon owners) and abandoned his post. As a final thumbing of the nose, he locked the gate. These people specialized in being helpless; they loved being rich enough to pay somebody to do absolutely everything for them.

So there. No little rectangle of plastic would open that gate now. Let them sit there and fume and be helpless for a while.

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