

Dragon in the Land:

People and Mega-fire in California

by Howard V. Hendrix

Episode One: Lightning and Smoke

Thunder rolls across a thousand miles of dry August sky. It has happened before, but never this bad. Not in living memory. Not in written history.

Living memory is short. People forget. Even written history, here near the geographic center of California, goes back at most only a few centuries. What is about to happen, however, will be remembered -- and will be written about.

A few days ago, forecasters began tracking a flow of monsoonal moisture out of the Gulf of Mexico, moving west and north. With every basin and range it crosses between Texas and Nevada, however, more moisture is rung out of that flow. By the time the parent storm reaches the east side of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and begins to climb above Mount Whitney, it is dry -- painfully dry.

Conditions are already drier than normal, too, in eastern Fresno County, at the midpoint of the great arc of the approaching storm. In a typical central California August, live fuel moisture drops to around seventy per cent. In

manzanita, live fuel moistures below eighty per cent are considered critical, and the bushes will burn as if dead. In the manzanita of the foothills from Corlew Mountain to Watts Valley, fuel moistures are running at fifty-five per cent. The situation is not much better in the brush and conifers blanketing the mountains near Jose Basin. There, fuel moistures top out at sixty per cent.

Day-time temperatures over much of inland California have remained in the low hundreds for over a week. Humidity has been hovering below ten per cent, with no significant nighttime recovery. Fine dead fuels, including the sunbleached grasses from Sky Harbor to Loper Valley, are down to two per cent moisture content. In grass that dry, even a broken bottle among the stems can lens the sunlight enough to make the grassland flash into flame.

Having overtopped Mount Whitney, the oncoming storm at last rains itself down -- very little in water, and very much in lightning. In the dry lightning episode of August 23, 1999 (the most recent event of similar magnitude) more than a million strikes torched off 3,000 fires across California. In the space of a few hours, however, this new August storm's progress results in nearly twice the number of strikes and ignitions, throughout parched and tinder-dry wildlands from the Anza-Borrego Desert to the Oregon border.

By late afternoon, the thunder has echoed away into memory. The worst of the day's storm has passed, but it has sewn the dragon's teeth in its wake.

In their house on the eastern edge of the Twin Ponds tract, Peter and Mary Shaw open the north windows to let in the fresh evening breeze -- and smell something burning.

They search through the house first. Then, walking past two of their grandkids playing in the front room, they see out the picture window a dozen columns of smoke rising to the east, some of them closer (what looks like small plumes in the Loper Valley country) and some further away and larger, above what Pete guesses must be Burrough Valley and Watts Valley.

Moving through the house, Mary and Pete agree the smoke smells like it's coming not from the east, but from the west -- which is odd, since they see no evidence of fire in that direction.

At about the same moment, Peter's cousin, Joseph Shaw, and his wife Yolanda are stepping out onto the back deck of their home near Shaver Lake, each of them holding a glass of wine. As they look toward the declining sun over Jose Basin, they see smoke in the south and west.

Joe steps inside for a pair of binoculars. Returning to the back deck, he sees through the binocs into the smoke, where long red-orange tongues of fire lick upward toward the crowns of trees -- distant, but not distant enough.

A dragon a thousand miles long has awakened. It yawns, stretches. Soon it will run. Then it will fly.

Episode Two: Remembrance of Fires Past

Before he and Yolanda took early retirement and moved to the mountains near Shaver Lake, Joe Shaw taught physics at Santa Barbara Community College. He understands that every fire is a complex problem, an equation, a computation whose inputs are fuel, oxygen, and spark.

He knows that anything capable of burning will burn once it gets hot enough. He knows that a little over a fifth of every breath we take is made up of oxygen. A spark can be provided by a hiker striking a match, a smoker tossing a cigarette out a car window, a broken bottle concentrating sunlight in dry grass.

Or by lightning striking to earth, millions of times.

As Joe watches the fires in Jose Basin lick up toward the crowns of the trees, he realizes it's not what he knows that's important -- it's what he remembers. What Joe remembers is the nightmare of the Painted Cave Fire, which destroyed more than six hundred homes and businesses near Santa Barbara in late June of 1990. . . .

Joe is on a flight returning him to his home in Santa Barbara. It will turn out to be the last flight that will be allowed to land in Santa Barbara for several days. As the plane nears the airport, he sees a huge pillar of smoke to the northeast, near where he and Yolanda have lived for over twenty five years. When he calls home from the airport, neither his wife nor his fifteen year old son Paul answer the phone -- both a relief, and a further worry.

After making half a dozen calls to friends around town, he eventually determines that his wife and son have made a quick escape from home and are now staying at the home of Paul's girlfriend, Claire. Reaching Claire's house by taxi, he is reunited with his family, to everyone's joy and relief.

Things don't remain settled, however. Around ten o'clock that evening, his son gets a call from one of his friends saying that he's seen their house, still standing, in a long-distance shot on a TV report. Paul is determined to ride his mountain bike up to the house.

Unable to talk him out of it, Joe leads his son on a circuitous bike ride through the dark. Making their way around several roadblocks by taking smaller side-streets and bike paths, they manage to get several miles behind the fire perimeter and onto San Antonio Creek Road.

There, amid a pall of acrid smoke and eerie quiet, they ride through a landscape of surreal devastation. Two thirds of the houses have been reduced to beds of ashes on slabs, with the occasional lonely chimney still jutting into the air. The entire scene is lit by the ghostly glare of flaring gas, burning in mid-air above melted gas meters.

Although their 5,000 gallon water tank is empty and all the outbuildings have burned to the ground, their house is still standing. Joe and his family did a good job of brush-clearing around the house. That defensible space has saved the place.

Throughout a mostly sleepless night they patrol the edges of the property. In the distance, houses that survived the initial fire eight hours earlier now flare up and burn to the ground, one by one. . . .

That was the night Joe got what his cousin Pete, down in Twin Ponds, jokingly calls "fire-prevention religion." He knows that fire can be a powerful servant but also a tyrannical master.

Once he and Yolanda moved to the mountains, Joe became very much involved with the Highway 168 Fire Safe Council, where he learned more about the importance of defensible space. He religiously applied that concept to his own land and home. With the help of the Fire Safe Council, he and his neighbors on the southern edge of the West Village applied for and received a grant for hazardous fuels reduction.

With local California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection help, he and his neighbors used that grant and their own in-kind labor to help Cal Fire selectively remove brush and small trees from a corridor nearly a mile long and extending two hundred feet on either side of their tract's roads. Along with several of his neighbors he also became part of the Shaver Lake Volunteer Fire Department.

As he begins suiting up in his SLVFD gear now, Joe hopes his cousin Pete isn't facing something like the fire he's watching move through Jose Basin, and toward Shaver Lake.

Like many other people in the foothills and mountains who have begun to smell smoke, Joe looks at the landscape around him, and begins his own calculation. He wonders if he's improved his odds enough. Combined with nearby lands owned and similarly fuel-treated by Southern California Edison, his treated area along the southwestern edge of Shaver Lake's West Village provides a much needed fuel break. But will it be enough?

There is never any way to insure absolute safety, but he and his neighbors have done what they could -- and much more than Pete and his community, or even the rest of West Village, have.

EPISODE THREE: Red Ball Sun

The thunder of the great dry lightning storm is gone. Another type of electric crackle and hiss still sounds, however as Mary turns on the scanner and takes up her position beside it in the kitchen. Peter Shaw thinks she is overreacting -- despite the smell of smoke heavy in the air around Corlew Mountain.

"You're probably worrying too much about this," he says. "As usual."

"And you're probably worrying too little about it," she replies. "As usual."

Pete smiles and shrugs. Another variant of their usual endless conversation. Between too much and too little, they seem to have struck a fairly

successful balance, in their three decades of marriage. They haven't driven each other too crazy, or too deeply into debt -- at least not yet.

Pete initially bought the scanner to appease his brother Joe, the volunteer firefighter. Truth to tell, Mary has always listened to it more than Joe has. It appeals to the same part of her that also finds The Weather Channel relentlessly fascinating. Go figure.

Almost despite himself, Pete has learned to listen to the scanner and understand its noises. He recognizes the voices of the firefighters on duty at Cal Fire's nearby Hurley and Blasingame Fire Control Stations. He knows how the captains of Battalions 11 and 12 sound when they come on the line.

As the sun settles toward the horizon, Pete begins to share some of Mary's concern about the developing situation. Even if he hadn't already smelled smoke, Pete would still know this wasn't an ordinary day at the Fire Stations -- just by the sound of those firefighters' voices, and the high volume of communications traffic.

What is coming over the scanner now is not good. Grass fires have started between Millerton Lake and Sky Harbor Road, in the steep, sloping terrain north of Table Mountain Casino. Lightning-caused grassfires have also sparked up along the series of mesas known as the Tabletops, and have already turned into brushfires near Valerie Meadows.

The mention of Valerie Meadows and fire jogs Pete's memory. He goes to his desk to look for a topographic map of his area. Battalion Chief Craig Tolmie

mentioned something about that area when he stopped in to do a fire safety inspection of Pete's property. He tries to remember exactly what it was that Tolmie said, but can't quite put his finger on it.

That inspection, like the purchase of the scanner, was another thing Pete agreed to grudgingly -- more to keep Joe off his high horse than from any more safety-minded motivation.

To be honest, Pete really didn't think he had much cause to worry. It wasn't like he lived in the middle of a forest, the way his brother Joe does. Pete made sure he brought that up to Tolmie when the Battalion Chief stopped in for the inspection.

Chief Tolmie agreed that different combustibles made for different types of fire. Fires in forested lands tended to "spot," or cast firebrands a quarter mile and more ahead of the main fire. Spotting was much less of a problem in grassland fires, which tended to move fast and stay low (if you were lucky). Grassland blazes also tended to burn with less intensity and to be of shorter duration than fires in timberlands.

Pete has always thought that just keeping the grass cut back one hundred feet around structures, and discing a five foot wide area along the perimeter of the property, would be enough to keep his house defensible during a grassland fire.

Tolmie agreed that it usually was, but not always. Grassfires don't always stay low. Too often they climb the fuel ladder, through brush and into bull

pinetrees and oaks. Those trees, once aflame, are quite capable of throwing off firebrands ahead of them, especially if the weather and wind conditions are right.

The bigger fuel-ladder problem, Chief Tolmie said, was that grass fires also readily climb into ornamental plantings that owners put in but neglect to keep pruned once the plants get larger -- until those plantings are growing right up against the house, or under decks and eaves.

The biggest problem of all was what Tolmie called "receptive fuel beds." These included items like patio furniture pads, rats' nests in firewood stacks, discarded construction lumber and other junk left out in the yard or piled against the lattice-work skirts under decking. All of these could provide places for sparks and brands to land, gain a foothold, and threaten houses and outbuildings that might otherwise have gone unharmed.

"Pete, what are you looking for?" Mary calls from the kitchen and her post beside the scanner. "Didn't you hear them say Sky Harbor? That's where Billy and Karen are."

"Trying to find a topo map of the area. Ah, here! Found it." Unfolding the map, he makes his way back toward the kitchen. Walking and glancing at the map, he thinks about his older son and daughter-in-law's place in Sky Harbor.

There are forty to fifty homes in that area, he guesses, most of them clustered near where Sky Harbor Road dead-ends into the South Finegold Day Use Area. The lots are steep -- not a good thing in a fire.

Although it is one way in and one way out, Sky Harbor is still a fairly wide, County-maintained road. The tract at its end is served by fire hydrants too, if he remembers right. Now, if Billy and Karen don't have too many unpruned bushes up against their house, or too many of those receptive fuel beds, they'll probably be okay. . . .

"Let's give them a call and see if they're home," he says to Mary as he lays out the map on the dining room table. "I'm more worried about Tom and Jen and the rest of their kids -- and us, too, if you really want to know."

"What do you mean? Nothing on the scanner mentioned Twin Ponds, Morgan Canyon, or Gooseberry."

"I know. But I just remembered something that fire chief said when he did the inspection."

"Which was?"

"Back in the seventies, a fire started below Valerie Meadows. Prevailing winds funneled it up along Auberry Road, this side of the Tabletops. It swept through what's now the Granite Creek and White Thorn areas, toward Little Wild Horse Valley and Wellbarn Road. It swept around Corlew Mountain, right across Twin Ponds here. All the way over to Morgan Canyon and the Gooseberry area. In a single afternoon."

Mary and Pete look at the grandkids. Tom and Jen's two youngest -- Melissa, age four, and Jeremy, age two -- are playing in the front room of Grammy and

Grampy's unofficial daycare center. The pre-schoolers seem to have little inkling of what is going on.

"I'm going to call Tom's place and see if any of their kids or the parents are home," Mary says. "I think the kids are all back in school, as of last week."

"I'll call Billy on the cell phone," Pete says, "but we'd better be quick. We may have to evacuate."

Pete walks out the front door, to the spot on their property where he gets the best signal for his cell phone off the Black Mountain and Owens Mountain towers. The signal is still too patchy for his liking, but he gets through to Billy's number -- and his answering machine.

"Hi, you two -- this is Dad," he says. "Looks like that lightning storm left a heckuva mess behind it, huh? Give me a call when you get a chance, either on our landline or cell phone number." He gives them the numbers, just in case, then adds, "I should be able to get your call. Right now I'm just hauling away from the house anything that'll burn. I may hose the place down, too, if it looks like we'll have to evacuate. If we're not here at the house, you'll probably still be able to get Mom and me on the cell phone. Love you both. Bye."

Dragging a patio furniture pad away from the house, Pete looks up and gazes off to the west. Through the smoke-filled sky, the setting sun is a blood red ball.

Episode Four: The Running Battle

As the sun slips toward night, the struggle to save the community of Shaver Lake has begun in earnest. Volunteer Firefighter Joe Shaw, in full, yellow nomex personal protective equipment, takes a break from tossing firewood away from where it's been wrongly stored -- beneath the stairs and decking of a four thousand square foot "summer cabin" in the Musick Falls development, south of Shaver.

The house is built beside a rock outcropping at the end of a ridge. From the outcropping, Joe can easily see into the distance, toward Redinger Lake and the Valley. What he sees there is half a dozen columns of heavy smoke rising from separate wildfires, fanned by erratic winds and downdrafts in the wake of the big dry lightning event.

Closer at hand, in the bowl of air above Jose Basin, he sees the air war and hears the ground war underway. An air tanker drops retardant along the approaching fire-front.

Joe counts at least six fires visible between where he's standing and the Valley floor. He realizes how thinly stretched regional fire-fighting resources must be. If the same situation is happening all over California, there's not going to be nearly enough equipment to share around. He knows how lucky he and everyone in Shaver is, to have any air support at all.

The sound of bulldozers, clanking like tanks in the forest, echoes up from almost directly below, between the Dogwood subdivision and Musick Falls. Another piece of luck: The heavy equipment and its operators were on their way down the mountain from a fuel-break job up near Big Creek. Having stopped at the Hungry Hut for supper, the operators, along with their equipment, were dragooned by Cal Fire and Edison personnel into bulldozing fire breaks, once the severity of the fires in Jose Basin became clear.

Only a half hour earlier, Joe and his fellow crewmembers were in the thick of that fight, just below Dogwood, in an area the local residents call "Dogpatch."

Clearing and thinning efforts in Dogwood have been slowed by obstacles to the funding of their fire project, despite the best efforts of the folks there. The residents of Dogpatch, in contrast, have been able to accomplish much the same clearing and thinning work that Joe and his neighbors have also done.

In Dogpatch the firefighters can make a stand, but they have to be careful. If the fire managed to get through the line at Dogpatch and into Dogwood -- with its steep roads and thickets of trees and brush -- there was a danger that the firefighters' escape routes would be cut off, potentially exposing them to a dreaded burnover.

As they drove through Dogwood and into Dogpatch, Joe and the rest of his SLVFD crew saw that at least the evacuation was proceeding -- if not perfectly smoothly, then at least less chaotically than Joe expected. He silently thanked

heaven that someone had had the foresight to develop and implement an evacuation plan for Dogwood and Dogpatch. Such preparation might well save some lives, now.

Once on the fire line, Joe and his fellow crewmembers learned that Captain Mark Glass of Cal Fire was their division supervisor. Glass had assigned them to structure protection in Dogpatch.

Reaching their assigned location, they parked their engine -- still running and facing in the direction of their escape route, and with its wheels left unchocked, in case a sudden getaway became necessary. He and the crew did a quick hose lay around to the back of the Stinson house.

Joe found himself in the role of nozzleman, facing downslope in the direction of the smoke and approaching fire. From below, the prolonged roar of flames was punctuated by persistent loud popping sounds as a flood of fire surged toward them.

The trees on the slope below them started to quiver, waver, and burst into flame. Burning firebrands wafted toward them like constellations of falling stars, igniting small spot-fires where they reached the earth.

Joe turned from dousing spot-fires to face the wall of crowning flame approaching from below. A thought rose into his mind, unbidden.

"Do we really want to be here? Why can't we just drop these hoses and hightail it? Why aren't we already back at the truck, cutting these hoselines

loose with our axes? Shouldn't we be putting pedal to the metal and getting the heck out of here?"

He returned to the work of suppressing yet more spot fires, telling himself, over and over, "I've been trained to do this. I can do this. If this fire's going to be stopped, somebody has to do this."

Turning back to glance at the main fire-front again, he saw the fire reach the area that had been thinned and cleared below the house. The flames, deprived of much of their fuel, began to lay down and burn with far less force. The water from his crew's hoses was enough -- barely -- to slow the fire-front's advance.

Just then, the world went orange. After a moment, Joe realized with relief that it wasn't an explosion of flame. Instead, one of the air-attack planes had scored a direct hit on them and their truck -- with fire retardant.

They were still working on spot fires when a Cal Fire patrol unit pulled up.

"The incident commander says to redeploy your engine to the Musick Falls area," the Cal Fire engineer told them, breaking out of his radio traffic. "Here. Let's hose as much of that retardant off while we've got a minute, then you're off to your next location."

Before he returns to removing the last of the firewood from below the "cabin" stairs here in Musick Falls now, Joe takes another look from the rock outcropping. The wind seems to have shifted again -- slightly and

unpredictably, but enough that the fire is headed more strongly up-canyon, casting its firebrands in a more northerly direction.

With just that small shift, the threat to Musick Falls has become considerably less. Joe breathes a sigh of relief. He also knows, however, that he and his crew probably won't be left in this area long. He suspects their efforts will be needed elsewhere, and soon.

Moments later, he's proven right. Word comes down that they're being redeployed -- this time to the West Village, where Joe and Yolanda make their home. He knows that too many sections of the Village are a firefighter's nightmare. . . .

Scaring myself again, Joe thinks. He reminds himself that he lives in what is probably the safest part of the West Village. Yet, as he and his crew drive up Highway 168 toward their new location, he cannot help wondering, again and again, how his wife is doing, and whether their own home will make it through the night now quickly falling.

EPISODE FIVE: EVACUATIONS AND DESTINATIONS

"I wish I could be more optimistic, Mr. Shaw," the deputy calls to Pete and Mary from his patrol SUV, "but I don't want to lie to you. The Meadows fire is moving up the drainage between the Tabletops and the North Fork of Little Dry Creek. It's already jumped Auberry Road at the Clovis nineteen mile marker.

The road is closed to traffic just north of there. It's no longer safe to shelter in place. You and your family need to evacuate. Now."

"Where to?" Pete asks.

"Auberry Union School. Not Old Auberry School in Auberry Valley -- the one in the town of Auberry proper."

"Why not Foothill Middle School?"

"Afraid not, Mrs. Shaw. Cal Fire says if the fire gets into the notch behind Marshall Hill, or between Marshall Hill and Corlew Mountain, there's a danger it'll split, with one arm of it heading along Wellbarn through Auberry Valley. It might fan out all the way from Temperance Flat to the Spearhead country, behind the Middle School."

"And the other arm?"

"Right through Twin Ponds here, sir. Might even get to Morgan Canyon and Gooseberry. That's what the fire folks at Hurley are saying, anyway. That's why you and everyone else here have to leave."

"You said Auberry Road is closed south and west of here," Pete says. "Is Highway 168 still open through Morgan Canyon to the Valley floor?"

"I think so, but I wouldn't count on it for long. A shelter's being set up at Sierra High, too, I think. You better move fast if you want to try that way. I've got to be going too -- got to move your last few neighbors along."

They say their goodbyes. Pete finishes loading the blue pickup, hefting in extra clothes, then their Emergency Kit in its big plastic bin filled with

medicines, food, and water. Mary calls for him to bring out their cat Roz in her cat carrier, then their little mutt Blue in his dog crate. He is glad she remembered them, and he's careful to leave enough space under the camper shell for any other last-minute items Mary might want to bring out.

As the dusk reddens toward black and night, Mary comes back from locking up the house with nothing more in her arms beyond two sleepy grandkids. They put the kids into their safety seats in the crew cab. The kids don't even wake up.

"Ready to go?"

Mary nods. They take a last long look at their home, then open the front doors of the pickup truck and climb in. Pete drives them slowly away. He glances at Mary, but she is focused on the rearview mirror, watching the image of their house vanishing into darkness behind them.

The smoke, thicker now, makes them cough. Looking left, he thinks he sees his first hint of not-so-distant fire, a glow around the west shoulder of Corlew Mountain. A sizable line of cars -- something unheard of in Twin Ponds -- is waiting to turn right at the intersection with Auberry Road.

Thinking of that glow past Corlew's shoulder and the fire that's making it, Pete finds himself growing impatient very quickly. It's all he can do to keep from laying on the horn.

"I'll try to call Tom and Jen's place again and see if I can't get through," Mary says as they turn onto Auberry Road and head northeast, toward Prather. A moment later Mary makes a sound of disgust.

"Didn't get through?"

"All lines are busy!"

"Too many people trying to get through on their cell phones, I guess."

An emergency vehicle, headed south and west, speeds loudly and furiously toward them. Pete pulls over onto the shoulder until it has passed. Before he can pull back onto the road, a second vehicle decked with lights and siren hurtles into view and away.

"Pete, the deputy said 168 down Morgan Canyon is still open, right?"

"That's what he said."

"Could we try to get to Tom and Jen's place, maybe?"

Pete thinks about it a minute as they drive. At last he shrugs.

"Okay. We'll give it a shot."

Easier said than done. The Canyon Forks area at Prather, where Auberry Road and Morgan Canyon come together, is a nightmare of fleeing cars and trailers headed away from various fires, and fire and emergency vehicles headed toward those blazes. The traffic on Auberry Road is backed up almost to Foothill Middle School.

Pete breaks out of the traffic snarl by taking the gravel back entrance into the Canyon Forks Shopping Center. Cutting across the Center's parking lot, he drives past the Pizza Factory and Mar-Val Market and the bank. The power to all the lights and signs goes out. Through the sudden dark he makes his way

below Velasco's Mexican Restaurant, the Tiny Mart, and the post office, out onto Morgan Canyon.

They drive beneath clear dark skies in which the stars look suddenly large and bright. Pete and Mary and the grandkids are almost alone on the road for a moment, down the first straight stretch on Morgan Canyon, into the first turns. Then they see red brake lights and lights whirling in lightbars atop emergency vehicles ahead, blocking the road.

"Fire's crossed the highway between Eagle Crest and Millerton Road," a California Highway Patrol officer tells them. "We're turning everyone around."

"But my son and his family live just ahead here," Pete says. "On Gooseberry, right before it turns into Pennyroyal. We've got two of their children in the back with us -- "

"I'm sorry, sir. No exceptions. Emergency vehicles only."

As if to make the point, a Bald Mountain Fire Protection District fire engine appears, weaving its way down both sides of the highway, among the stopped cars. The officer waves the engine through into the Gooseberry area. He then very forcefully signals for Pete to get his vehicle turned around and headed back up the Morgan Canyon corridor toward Prather.

As he drives back toward Prather, Pete silently wishes those Bald Mountain firefighters luck. Why they were down below Prather is a mystery to him, but he knows they'll have their hands full back there in the Gooseberry country.

Almost impossible to find some of the homes back there in broad day if you don't already know the way, Pete thinks. In a blackout night it'll be a maze of chaos. But hadn't his brother Joe gone behind the fire lines, during that Santa Barbara fire? He'd come out okay, hadn't he? An idea begins to form in Pete's mind.

"Are we going to head up to Auberry School, then?" Mary asks.

"Not quite. More toward Sierra High. Maybe I can leave you and the kids there, if the emergency folks already have a shelter set up."

"And where will you be going?"

"I know some backdoor ways in, off of Lodge Road, that cut down between Little Dry Creek and Black Mountain. They're a bit on the rough side, but they eventually make their way down into the Gooseberry country."

Mary gives him a long look.

"I hope you know what you might be getting yourself into."

"So do I," Pete says. He thinks of the chaotic, unlit maze of the rough night roads he'll be travelling, after he drops Mary and the grandkids off at Sierra High School. Even without the thought of wildfires and lost emergency vehicles storming into that picture, the prospect does not inspire confidence.

Episode 6: Maze of Chaos

In the Bald Mountain Fire truck that swept past the Shaws and everyone else in the stopped traffic on Highway 168, Captains Allyn Bell and Cam Donnahoo wonder just what kind of mess they've gotten themselves into as they make their way through the Gooseberry road system.

It was supposed to be an easy, show-the-crisp-uniform-and-shiny-engine kind of day. Then the dry lightning storm swept through and all hell broke loose.

This isn't even their service area. Sure, their district has mutual and instant aid agreements with other nearby fire departments. Along with Bald Mountain's Water Tanker 63, their Type I engine can be automatically dispatched to structure fires, wildland fires, and large-scale motor vehicle accidents. While en route to Gooseberry, however, their engine and the water tanker have already been split up, which means that no other local or more appropriate resources are immediately available.

Bell and Donnahoo see the red-coned flashlights guiding them into the staging area next to the Gooseberry command post. A woman in a white Fire Chief's helmet strides toward them. Her name is Penman and she's the incident commander for the Gooseberry area.

"I know you volunteers usually do structure protection," she says. "But this is a huge event and I need you on Medical/Fire as a first-in unit. This isn't going to be an easy one at any rate."

"Oh?" asks Bell.

"Electricity's out. What little illumination you might have counted on will be pretty much gone now. We just got a call for a medical emergency, right up here where Gooseberry climbs toward the top of the ridge and becomes Loper Valley Road -- we think. Here's the address number, but it might not be much help."

"Why's that?" asks Donnahoo.

"Besides being narrow, steep, very rough, and unpaved, the roads and their addresses pretty much have no rhyme or reason to them," Penman says, spreading out a map and holding it into the beam of her flashlight. "Gooseberry and Pennyroyal split off from each other and come back into each other at odd intervals. At points one or the other of them changes its name to Lynx Lane. Parts of all three have brush and scrub trees arching all the way over the road."

"Somebody local to Auberry might do better with this," Donnahoo suggests.

"Don't I know it, but you're at least more acquainted with the area than the Utah and Nevada crews that'll be coming in. You're the only ones I can spare, at the moment. The rest of my crews are on their way toward this area, here -- between where Loper Valley tees into Nicholas, and down here where it hooks up with Ashlan Avenue. We've got to get crews in to stop the main fire front there, or we won't be saving anything clear to Lodge Road. Our tactical radio channel is TAC 8. Keep an open line. Good luck."

The trip through Gooseberry is everything Chief Penman promised -- and worse. Given their lane-and-a-half width, their missing street signs and incoherent address numbers, the roads back here would be a chore to navigate even in midday with no traffic. With power out and citizens fleeing in private vehicles through the night, Bell and Donnahoo just hope they don't become another accident statistic.

When they get to what should be the location of the medical emergency, there is nothing -- no house, not even a barn.

"Now what?"

"Let's push on a little farther," Donnahoo says, looking at the map. "The top of the ridge is still a ways away, I think. The place has got to be around here somewhere."

Perhaps a quarter of a mile further on, a young woman with a baby on one hip steps out into the road, waving them down frantically.

"My husband's in that barn there! He heard about the evacuation! He was just trying to salvage some of his stuff! He was in a hurry -- and somehow a fire started round back! One of the floorboards broke and his leg went through! I couldn't pull him out! Then I couldn't get to him on account of the smoke!"

Bell and Donnahoo back their engine in, doing their size-up of the situation in the process. Sure enough, the barn is at least partially involved in fire, and that blaze is threatening to spread to the surrounding brush and

oaks. Donnahoo grabs a fire axe and Bell pulls a Halligan tool off their rig. Each of them snatches up his self-contained breathing apparatus, or SCBA.

Bell sniffs the air before he dons his SCBA. He detects a pungent, chemical scent.

"Smell that?"

"Yeah," Donnahoo says, nodding. "Meth lab?"

"Smells like it."

They don their SCBAs and fire helmets. As they approach the structure, they see that the woman has put the baby down.

"I think he's still in the second room on the left."

The firefighters nod. The woman sets to work frantically -- switching back and forth from using a duff hoe called a McLeod and a wildland firefighter's axe known as a Pulaski -- trying to keep the fire from moving into the surrounding landscape. Bell and Donnahoo switch on the air from their tanks. They get down on their knees and then down on their bellies, crawling along low beneath the hot smoke billowing out of the burning structure.

Bell keeps his left hand and arm in contact with the wall, while with his right he sweeps his axe handle out in arcs across the floor, searching in the dark for obstructions and obstacles. Donnahoo does the same with the wrecking-bar Halligan tool in his right hand, while with his left hand he holds on to Bell's boot-clad left foot. Together they keep in constant communication informing each other of corners and doorways.

Before long they hear the sound of a man moaning in pain. When they reach him, he begins gasping out, again and again, about how he thinks his right leg is broken. Disentangling that limb from the hole in the floorboards, while at the same time trying to keep below the smoke and close to the floor, is not easy on any of them, but at last it's done.

Threading nylon straps under the downed man's arms and shoulders, Bell and Donnahoo manage to reverse their route in -- Bell's right hand and arm on the wall this time. Bell wishes he had more hands as he and Donnahoo try to keep hold on their fire tools while at the same time they drag the injured man along the floor. After what seems like forever they are back through the doorway, then through the next room, and then out the main entrance at last.

Once they're clear, Donnahoo runs for a backboard and splints to immobilize the man and his broken leg. The downed man (and presumed meth cooker) is in shock from his injuries, and fading in and out of consciousness. They lift him, carry him, and slide him onto the long seat at the back of their rig's extended cab.

The man's wife, meanwhile, has unfortunately begun to lose her battle to prevent the meth lab fire from spreading into the surrounding landscape. The entire building and several surrounding trees are soon engulfed in flame.

"Ma'am, it's no use," Donnahoo says. "We've got to get out of here."

"But my car's back behind the barn!"

"Leave it," Bell says. "There's no one else around the property? No other children or adults?"

"No."

"Then you can ride with your husband and us."

By the time they're rolling, the fire is rolling too. As they come around a tight turn, they see that it is sweeping up the dell beyond the barn -- right toward where brush and trees make a highly combustible canopy clear over the road. Bell glances at Donnahoo.

"Go for it."

Bell guns the engine. The fire is coming on fast, spreading with the swiftness of dragon's wings -- and the truck seems to plunge uphill with almost painful slowness. The canopy of bull pine, oak, and scrub begins to catch fire as they pass under it. In the rearview mirror, the canopy of trees bursts into an arc of intensely orange flame, but they're through it.

Donnahoo gives Bell the thumbs up, and both smile tiredly. Donnahoo radios in to say that they are transporting an injured person, and gives as best he can the location of the fire that began in the meth lab.

Their triumph is short-lived. Moments later, although they are well away from the fires, they are also well and truly lost.

They are stopped at an intersection of eroded gravel and graded roads, when headlights appear. A caravan of three vehicles pulls up.

"You boys looking for a way out of this rat's maze?"

"That'd be a help," says Cam Donnahoo.

"Saw you go in earlier. I can get you out to Lodge Road."

"Thanks, Mister -- ?" Allyn Bell asks.

"I'm Pete Shaw. My grandkids and their neighbors are in the other cars.

Long story, but here we are."

"Thanks, Mister Shaw, but we've got an injured person to transport."

"Cal Fire and Forest Service were setting up a fire camp at Sierra High when I left. Helicopters -- you know, Life-Flight, all that."

"That would be a help. If there's enough light at the camp - and the winds aren't oo bad - " Bell begins.

"-- they might be flying patients out, even at night," Donnahoo says, completing his thought.

"Lead on, Mister Shaw," Bell says. "We'll be right behind you."

Episode 7: The Dragon in the West Village

Shaver Lake Volunteer Firefighter Joe Shaw is in the West Village -- and in the midst of every firefighter's nightmare scenario. All around them, he and his fellow SLVFD crewmembers hear the wail of sirens, the blaring of fire-engine air horns, the bleating of car horns.

Finding one of the rare spots where they can pull their rig into a driveway without blocking the road, Joe jumps out of their engine and strides toward one of the several choke points in the local road system.

As he makes his way downhill, amid the sparsely street-lit pandemonium, he can't help doing a quick size-up. Beneath the starlit skies, he sees that the real danger is silent, at least so far. That danger comes from all the older cabins, stacked cheek by jowl hereabouts, along a labyrinth of roads that are steep, or narrow, or winding, or dead-ended. Sometimes all of the above.

Too many of those cabins are roofed in untreated shingles of old-fashioned cedar shake -- tinder dry, matted with pine needles or blotched with moss. No matter how quaint and picturesque that might be in the winter and spring, now, in the back end of August, every moss-covered, needle-strewn, shake-shingled roof is a receptive fuel bed for the smallest windblown firebrand, the least falling spark.

Too many residences here are also "screened" from their handshake neighbors by brush and trees. Such privacy cover often comes all the way up to and over the cabins' rooflines, and makes perfect fuel ladders from ground to building to roof.

With much shouting, whistling, and gesturing, he does his best to direct traffic out of a place which has far too few routes in and out, all of them too easily blocked, all too well-suited to trapping a line of traffic, or a fire engine and its crew. . . .

Best not to think about it. Enough to keep him busy just unraveling this traffic snarl. People aren't generally at their best in emergency evacuation situations. They tend to spook, like cattle, steering and braking and panicking, bulls and cows and steers in metal boxes full of flammable substances.

He manages to get traffic moving through his particular intersection, and has largely cleared that intersection when he notices that traffic is backing up again -- uphill from him, in the direction from which he came. Jogging back through the dark, he passes where his crew and their rig are parked, lights whirling. Less than a dozen yards beyond the rig, he comes to the source of the bottleneck.

On a more or less straight but single-lane street leading out of the tract, a car has stalled, facing uphill. It won't restart. He and the rest of his crew begin signaling the drivers of the cars behind the stalled vehicle to back down the hill. That takes some convincing, but eventually he gets enough of them moved back so that he and the crew can use the fire engine to push the stalled vehicle up the hill, over a short curb-wall and into a tiny front yard.

As he jumps out of the truck again, he sees the driver of the stalled vehicle, standing in the yard and looking unhappily at the damage to his vehicle. Joe's heart does not go out to the man.

He jogs back down the hill, waving the rest of the jammed vehicles up the hill and past him. He starts to cough. His chest begins to ache with the thickening smoke now billowing his way.

The last vehicles to come through "his" intersection are a Sheriff's Deputy in his SUV, and Captain Glass in his Cal Fire rig. The lights on both vehicles are still going, but their sirens silent. They too have been directing vehicles out of the West Village tract, it turns out.

"We've got everybody clear, as near as we can tell," says the deputy.

"That's good news."

"Yeah," says the weary deputy. "We can use some of that, about now."

As the deputy's vehicle pulls away, Captain Glass and his crew pull their rig up beside him.

"The fire's chimneying up a draw due west of here," Glass says. "We're in triage mode. We've got crews down nearer the south end, where things look more defensible. You see anything hereabouts worth staking a crew to?"

Joe's head is awl with his thoughts.

Triage mode.

Structures and neighborhoods with strong defensible space cleared around them, constructed from fire-resistant materials, or out of the direct path of the fire -- such structures and neighborhoods are likely to survive on their own.

Structures and neighborhoods with decent defensible space and at least moderately fire-resistant construction, but more directly in the path of the fire, will need saving and might also actually be savable, so they'll get a crew or two to work them.

Structures and neighborhoods lacking defensible space and fire resistant construction, and in the direct path of the fire, will not get crews to protect them because the firefighters themselves will be exposed to great risk for little or no potential benefit. No matter how much such structures and neighborhoods might need saving, they will not be saved. There are simply not enough crews and equipment to go around.

What of his wife, and his own place? They are nearer the south end, they have defensible space and fire-resistant construction. Maybe their place is out of the direct path of the fire, too.

But here? Around him?

"Nothing worth risking a firefighter's life for, here," Joe tells Glass. "Little or no defensible space, combustible roofing, narrow roads. It's a death trap."

Glass gives him a grim nod.

"Right. If these homeowners had wanted us to save more than foundations, they wouldn't have let things get so bad here. We're going to pull back to protect defensible structures near Highway 168. You and your crew need to be out of here. Now."

Joe nods and begins jogging up the hill toward his rig. No sooner has he reached it than, off to the west, in the direction from which he came, a long, whirling roar blots out the stars with a glaring stain of red-orange light. A house is just going up.

From a structure totally involved in flame, a swirl of sparks moves out on the gusty wind, a swarm of burning bees from a hive of fire. Firebrands -- those constellations of slowly falling stars, again -- nestle onto roofs and into trees. A moment later, someone else's home flashes skyward to oblivion as well. The process repeats itself, accelerating as it goes. A dragon spewing napalm would be hard-put to outpace the rate of destruction.

As they drive away, Joe remembers ashes on smoking slabs, lone chimneys, ghostly burning and flaring gas. The nightmare he saw in Santa Barbara has come round again. He prays a silent prayer for windless air and more fire crews.

Episode 8: Fire Camp

Pete Shaw and his oldest grandson Todd, his daughter-in-law Jen and their two middle grandkids, Tom and Jen's neighbors and their three kids, and Bell and Donnahoo's Bald Mountain fire engine all pull into the parking lot at Sierra High in a four-vehicle caravan.

At the edge of the lot, by the glare of the football field's lights, Pete sees Mary over near the gym, with Tom and Jen's two youngest -- Melissa on her right hand, Jeremy on her left. Has the power been restored? Pete wonders, seeing the lights. Or is everything here just on back-up generators?

Once the caravan has pulled in, Pete and Todd get out of Pete's truck and join Mary and Jen and the rest in hugs all around.

"Tom isn't with you?" Mary asks.

"He was working late and didn't hear about the fires," Jen said. "By the time he left Clovis, the Highway Patrol had shut down 168 above Academy. Pete just got to our place when Tom called."

"On the phone I told him to get a hotel room back in town and wait it out," Pete says, "while we take care of everything up here."

"Friant and Auberry roads are both closed to everything but emergency vehicles, too," Mary says with a nod. "We already knew that. Well, at least Jen and the kids are all together with us."

"Thanks to Pete. He was a big help getting us out the door and up the back roads -- to here."

"Glad it worked out," he says. "I'm going to go check up on those firefighters who came in with us, and the injury case they were transporting. Want to come along, Will?"

His ten year old grandson, who is fascinated by all things firefighter, nods eagerly. Pete spots in the distance -- under the football field's lights

-- the two Bald Mountain firefighters, Bell and Donnahoo, helping paramedics load a man with a broken leg off a gurney and into a helicopter waiting on the football field. The chopper pilots are risking medevac night flights, it seems.

Together Pete and Will walk in the direction of the field. They traverse a space that feels like the midway of a fairground or carnival at night, only all the acts involve firefighting, evacuations, and emergency services.

A small city of tents, filled with logistics and support services, runs in impromptu alleyways across every open space around the school. Ambulances and fire engines from Cal Fire, Forest Service, Fresno County, and four volunteer fire companies are staging out of the Sierra High and nearby Sierra Oaks Senior Center parking lots. Motors are running. People in fire helmets, heavy boots, and yellow Nomex wildland gear are shouting and gesturing.

By the time Pete and Will reach the edge of the football field, the helicopter has spun up and is lifting off. Pete overhears Bell and Donnahoo, talking to a Battalion Chief about the injured man. Pete gathers that the man started a fire while trying to salvage "product" from his meth lab.

The Chief gives a weary shake of the head and sends the men off to see a dispatcher near the main base tent. As they move away, the Chief calls after them, suggesting they try to get some sleep when they can. It's well after midnight and tomorrow will be a long day, he says.

Pete suddenly recognizes that it's Battalion Chief Tolmie he's been listening to -- the same man who did the fire inspection at his house.

"Excuse me, Chief Tolmie," he says. The Chief turns. "I don't know if you recognize me -- "

"Shaw, isn't it? From Twin Ponds?"

"That's right. I just drove the back roads into and out of the Gooseberry area to get my grandkids and their neighbors out -- "

"Yes, Donnahoo and Bell mentioned something about that," Tolmie says. He nods to the boy, who glances shyly at his feet. "And this is one of those grandkids, I presume?"

"Right."

"Should I see to it that you get a medal -- or that you get arrested?" Tolmie asks, giving him a frowning look that slowly changes to a tired smile. Now it's Pete's turn to glance down at his feet. "Better to beg forgiveness than ask permission, eh, Mister Shaw? You're lucky to be alive. We've already lost a family of four - caught in their car in a burnover behind our lines. Normally I'd turn you over to law enforcement, or at least the Public Information Officer, but my PIO seems to be MIA at the moment." Tolmie turns toward the Logistics base tent. "We can talk while we walk. Well? What did you see? What do you have to report?"

"More fires snaking up hillsides below Gooseberry than I've ever seen. It's moving through the treetops."

"Crown fire."

"Right. I even saw things that looked like fire tornadoes."

"Flame vortices."

"I suppose so. I never thought it could get this bad."

"Never has before," Tolmie says. "Low-intensity fires regularly cleaned out the understory of the western forests, burning up what was dead and down and overcrowded -- until a century ago."

Pete and Will both nod as they follow the Battalion Chief toward the base tent.

"What happened then?" Will asks.

"Full fire suppression became the policy. Zero tolerance for fire. After too many decades of that, though, the fuel has built up. The fires that sweep through the west now are anything but 'low intensity.' Throw in more severe drought, and more severe thunderstorms when storms do come -- due to human-induced global warming, or natural cycles, or whatever -- and you get fire events like this one."

A helicopter with an enormous bucket hanging from its belly sweeps past overhead, followed a moment later by the deep rumble of an air attack fire bomber, higher overhead. They stop outside the base tent.

"Things look really busy," Pete says.

"Too busy," Tolmie says. "Given my 'druthers I'd have a different command structure set up. Incident Command Post, Staging Area, Fire Camp, Helibase, and Logistics here -- I'd prefer them serving their different functions in different

places. Spread out, not all bunched together like this. Especially not with a major evacuation center practically in the middle of it."

"Why here, then?"

"We didn't have much choice, given the nature and number of incidents, and the local topography. Incident coordination for the Valerie to Gooseberry fire line, on what's now being called the Corlew fire, has been turned over to us. We're playing backup dispatch center for fires in Jose Basin and Shaver West Village. All more unorthodox than I'd like, but there it is."

"How is it . . . going?"

"Take a look," Tolmie says. They stop beside him in the entrance to the long, brightly-lit pavilion tent that serves as command, control, and communications hub of the larger fire camp.

Over radios and throat mikes, dispatchers and tacticians are receiving calls from and making calls to incident commanders, air attack units, police, sheriff, highway patrol and ambulance services. District, local, tactical, air-to-ground, and command channels are all abuzz with activity. Meteorologists drone reports on conditions. Voices are so interwoven with crackle, tone-outs, and scanner-static that, from the entrance, it's hard to tell where the human parts of the process end and the electronic parts begin.

Three television monitors, their sound muted, sit on wheeled carts on three sides of the main tent, one monitor tuned to The Weather Channel, the second to local news, the third to CNN, all of them featuring Special Report footage.

The Weather Channel footage shows satellite shots and Doppler radar of cloud passage during the previous day's dry lightning storms. The storm's lightning-strike counts, indicated by white triangles, are overlaid atop most of California and western Oregon.

Local news cameras feature shots taken at sunset showing column after column of thick smoke rising into the twilight, grey pillars whose fiery bases become more obvious with the fall of darkness. Snakes of flame wind their ways across grassland and up hills, bursting into tornadic fire amid brush and trees.

Then CNN shows an infrared shot from a satellite in near earth orbit. Within moments The Weather Channel and the local news outlet are carrying the same image: an immense shape of fire sprawled across the west.

"That's how it's going," Tolmie says. "The only hope the forecasters are holding out is some calming in the wind. That should last until another line of monsoonal flow comes through during the next day or so. If we're lucky there'll be more moisture in the next wave -- and not just more lightning. Until then, what you're looking at is what we're up against."

Pete and Will stare at the screens. On one screen, the triangles that indicate where lightning has struck -- especially over the higher elevations -- are so thick they look like an armor of overlapping white scales. On a neighboring screen is the same general shape, only made of smoke and fire.

"They look like a dragon," Will says.

"Yes, they do, now that you point it out. A dragon made of dragons. Nearly every triangle there is a fire in the wildland. No one has the staffing for a disaster of this magnitude. We're stretched beyond thin. There's nowhere to divert resources from -- at least nothing from less than two hundred miles away. We've got crews coming in from Nevada, Utah, even Montana."

A dragon made of dragons. With a jolt, the words remind Pete of something his brother Joe, the physicist, once told him: "A fire exhibits self-similarity across widely different scales of measurement." He didn't quite understand it at the time. Looking at the TV image of a fiery dragon tattoo sprawled across the western end of the continent, and thinking of the likeness of the lightning-strike graphics to an armor of triangular scales, Pete Shaw begins to understand.

"Is there something I can do to help?"

"Lend a hand to the Red Cross and Emergency Services people at the evacuation shelter over in the gym. They're way too short-staffed to handle something like this. Now, if you'll excuse me. . . ."

Pete and Will nod. Tolmie dons a headset. As Pete and his grandson turn to go, the Battalion Chief calls after them.

"Oh, and Mister Shaw, no more freelancing behind the roadblocks, okay? Son, you make sure he doesn't -- right? We don't need any more burnover victims."

They promise. He and Will walk toward the gym. Even before they get within fifty feet they can see people waiting in line to get inside.

"The house, gone! The horses, gone! Even the dog!" cries a woman before collapsing into great, racking sobs.

Pete hustles his grandson away, wanting to shelter him from such scenes. Even as he does, he knows he will not succeed. The gym must already be near capacity, yet more evacuees are coming all the time. Too many of them, he suspects, will arrive already bearing the burden of similarly horrific stories.

Episode 9: Man-dragon

Although the lightning that fell on and about Pine Ridge has caused no major fires there, Captain Gary Martin of the Pine Ridge Volunteer Fire Department has not slept well. The sound of the scanner running through channels has been the background to whatever dreams he and his wife Sue have been able to snatch from an uneasy night.

They have already worked one small fire in their area, but have been cycled out for a break as the first of several crews from out of state have come in.

On the scanner he's recognized several times the voice of his friend, Joe Shaw, working the fires to the west of Shaver Lake. Often during the night

Martin has been sure Chief Moore of the Shaver Lake Volunteer Fire Department would again call in mutual aid from Pine Ridge's Company 68. He initially thought Moore and regional officials up the chain of command might be holding PRVFD in reserve, presumably to protect the area south of Shaver and east of Highway 168. He realizes now that they are also being kept out so that, when mandatory fatigue rotations start, all the crews will not have to leave the fire lines at the same time.

The strategy is turning out to be a good one. Shortly before four in the morning, Pine Ridge Chief Larry Pearsall and Lieutenant Lisbeth Bundli, in the Chief's Patrol vehicle, and Engineer Gary Howell and Firefighter Michael Banton in Engine 268, all respond to a fire on Peterson Mill Road a mile east of the Sycamore Creek crossing - south and downhill of Pine Ridge. Martin knows that, even before the recent massive dry-lightning event, PRVFD has been called out three times to fight fires along Peterson and Cripe roads.

Giving up at last on any possibility of sleep, Martin dresses and walks into the kitchen. While the coffee brews, he switches between Dispatch, Weather, and Tac channels on his personal radio. From the fire crews' communications, he learns that the fire on Peterson seems to have been caused by a root smolder from one of the previous day's lightning strikes. The blaze has spread to two acres or so, but the Pine Ridge responders and a National Forest engine crew from Utah (covering Mountain Rest station for the already assigned Sierra National Forest crew) have now apparently managed to contain the blaze.

Martin thinks it could have been much worse. He's glad that, at long last, the winds have calmed to almost nothing this morning. The weather reports indicate a cooling trend - maybe even some moisture later in the day, at least over the high country.

He has just filled his battered steel coffee mug and capped it when he hears their fire company being toned out over the radio. A moment later, at 5:35 am, his pager and phone go off. It's Virginia Pearsall, dispatching him to a fire between the old Peterson Mill site and the crossing on Peterson the locals call "Four Corners". Virginia informs him that the Chief and Bundli, in the Chief's Patrol, are already proceeding to the scene, along with the fire crew from Utah. Martin is to take Patrol 68 and pick up Firefighter Frank Borrego on his way. Engineer Gene Van Dyne and Firefighter Dan Clayton will follow after them in Engine 468, just as soon as they can refill E468's water tank, drained in fighting the small blaze they earlier cycled off of.

As he suits up in his wildland gear, Martin thinks Howell and Banton in E268 must be finishing mop-up on the contained root-smolder fire. Grabbing his gearbag and striding to his Patrol unit in the pre-dawn light, he wonders how far along Gene Van Dyne is on readying E468.

Frank Borrego, already dressed in his yellow wildland gear, is waiting at the end of his driveway. Like Martin, who is a retired Fresno County Sherriff's deputy, Borrego too has a background in both firefighting and law enforcement.

He's an active duty patrol officer with Fresno PD, and this is supposed to be his day off.

They nod each other hello, and Martin starts the lights and siren. Within moments they see in the dim light Dan Clayton making his way to a fire department water tank on the neighboring property, where Gene Van Dyne is already filling E468's 500 gallon onboard tank with a short hard-line. Gary Martin leans on the horn, and Dan and Gene wave.

Siren blaring and lights whirling, their Patrol pickup truck bounces down the road, grinds across gravel after the paved road ends, then on past the junction of Upper and Lower Cressman Roads, to the locked gate separating the private lands of Pine Ridge from the public lands of the Sierra National Forest. Borrego jumps from the stopped Patrol unit, unlocks the heavy gate, and swings it out of the way. Borrego climbs back into the Patrol pickup and they drive through the gate, down the rough dirt road, through the deep shade of morning twilight.

They are not far from Four Corners when they come around a turn and encounter a speeding pickup truck ready to plant its headlights in their grille. Martin tries to evade, but they still collide with a glancing blow. The vehicles carome off each other.

Stunned but unhurt, Martin and Borrego hurry out of the Patrol to see if the other driver is all right. As Captain Martin talks to the man in the dawn light, Frank Borrego goes to check the vehicle damage. He happens to look into

the bed of the other pickup, where a tarp has come loose. He stares long and hard at what he sees. He's been a patrolman long enough to know when something doesn't smell right.

"Hey, Gary! Come back here a minute, will you?"

Captain Martin leaves the driver side window and joins Borrego. Pulling back the tarp a bit more, they see two jeep-cans of fuel, a clutch of road flares, and a drip torch. They glance at each other, but before they can fully turn toward the driver, the man behind the wheel - who has been watching them in his rearview mirror -- stomps on the gas pedal and spins away in a cloud of dust and gravel. Borrego and Martin jump away from the fishtailing vehicle.

As it disappears round a bend, Gary Martin walks toward the Patrol and thumbs on his radio.

"Engine 468, this is Patrol 68."

"Engine 468," Dan Clayton replies.

"What's your location?"

"Just coming up on the junction of Upper and Lower Cressman."

"Copy that. When you get to the back gate, close it and lock it. Repeat, close it and lock it. We have a suspected arsonist in a black pickup coming your way. Judging by his speed, he came through Peterson and doesn't know about the Cressman gate. Might want to slow him down."

"We'll shut the door, Patrol."

As Frank Borrego pulls P68 around and begins pursuit, Martin gets on the Tac channel and queries the Incident Commander with a description of their situation. The IC indicates he's waiting on an airdrop but probably has adequate ground resources at the moment. "Finish collaring your suspected firebug," says the IC, "then proceed to my location."

The tangle of black pickup and heavy gate is not a pretty sight when they come upon it. Borrego and Martin exit their vehicle, to find Van Dyne and Clayton making use of their first-aid training, already tending to the driver's injuries.

From his slumped position beside the front tire, the driver scowls at Martin and Borrego.

"Gene, you think you might have some of those plastic wire-ties in that truck of yours?" Martin asks.

"I just might," says Van Dyne, smiling as he turns away to go look for them. Borrego locates the driver's wallet and hands his driver's license to Martin.

"Mister Hiddall, I don't think these fires we've been having need your help. You're under arrest for suspected arson."

Borrego reads Walter Hiddall his rights as he and Clayton lift Hiddall to his feet. Van Dyne returns with a handful of long plastic wire-ties as Martin finishes radioing in a report to the Sherriff's office.

Hiddall stares at Martin.

"Who are you people?"

"Pine Ridge volunteers," Martin says.

"If you like," says Borrego, zip-tightening the plastic ties into impromptu handcuffs around Hiddall's wrists, "you can think of us as humble agents of your karma -- "

" - which seems to be coming around," Clayton says, tightening zips around Hiddall's ankles, "right about now."

By the time the Sheriff's deputy arrives in his SUV, Martin and Borrego are already on their way to the Corners/Mill fire. E468 has just finished winching Hiddall's totaled truck out of the road. As the deputy takes Hiddall into custody, Van Dyne and Clayton drive Engine 468 through the gate and through a morning that -- despite multiple fires still needing to be fought - has dawned beautiful with blue skies and puffy clouds.

Episode 10: Percent Contained

Joe Shaw's nightmare doesn't end until he falls asleep. He and the rest of the firefighters in the Shaver Lake Volunteer Fire Department have seen nearly twenty-three straight hours on the fire line by the time they are at last

relieved by fire crews from Big Creek and Huntington - firefighters who have themselves already put out smaller fires in their own districts.

He hopes he has seen the worst this burn can throw at them. The dragon of wildfire that ravaged West Village went on to break through to Highway 168 in the area north of Toyon Road, near Linnet and Foxtail. Holding the line at 168, through the back end of the night and into the early morning, he and his fellow firefighters have learned what it is to stare the dragon in the eye, to feel its furnace breath in their faces.

Despite all the water and foam the firefighters have thrown against the blazes, they have seen houses and businesses stain the sky with the glare of their unstoppable immolation. Beneath stars failing with morning, they have stood witness to the horrific beauty and terrible roar of eighty-foot tall Ponderosa pines going up like Roman candles, shedding firebrands onto and across the asphalt of 168. In dawn light they have seen and heard those seeds of fire crackling and snapping and tinkling in the eerie emptiness of a major state road sealed off to all non-emergency traffic.

Some of those burning seeds make it across the highway to fall in duff and brush, igniting spot fires that must be put out lest the dragon leap the road and burn the East Village as well. They are luckier in the East than in the West Village. The roads in and out of East Village are wider, the homes and neighborhoods are more cleared of brush and fuels and prove to be significantly more defensible than those in the West Village were.

The greatest luck of all, though, has been the stillness of the air. The burning brands have not scattered nearly as far as they might have, and the firefront here has remained small enough that the blaze has not generated significant winds of its own. Still, attacking the spotfires on the ground and in tree branches, hitting them with streams of water, Pulaski fire-axes, McLeod duff-hoes - all of that has kept the exhausted firefighters more than a little busy throughout the morning and into the afternoon.

The day grows overcast, not just from palls of smoke but from extensive cloud cover building above the Sierra. To him and all the other sleep-deprived men and women caught in the hot work of putting out spotfires east of 168, those clouds are a high shade of relief.

By the time Joe is allowed to come off the line and get some shuteye, he seems to have been living on coffee, Gatorade, and bottled water for days. He is almost too tired to see straight.

From the Incident Commander he learns that he will have four hours for sleep before he'll be required to return to the fire line. Cots have been set up in a temporary fire camp at the Cal Fire station on Dinkey Creek Road, to which he will now report. From the IC he also learns that, fortunately, there have been no fatalities in their area so far. Everyone has been successfully relocated from both West Village and East Village, under a mandatory evacuation order.

Most of the people voluntarily evacuated from north of the Villages have gone on up Highway 168 to the Sierra Summit ski area -- the same area to which people from Big Creek have also been voluntarily evacuated. Everyone south of the Villages and north of Pine Ridge is also under a voluntary evacuation guideline. The many who have chosen to follow that guidance have evacuated east along Dinkey Creek Road, out to Pacific Gas and Electric's Helms Project properties near Wishon and Courtright Reservoirs.

Joe presumes that his wife Yolanda has evacuated out toward the Helms area, but when he tries to contact her via cell phone, he finds that both her cell phone number and their home phone number are unreachable. All local phonelines are busy.

He calls Yolanda's sister Maria in Colorado - the person they agreed on as their point of contact in just such a local-overload emergency as this one. He is relieved to learn from Maria that Yolanda is safe and is indeed staying at the Red Cross Evacuation Shelter at the Helms site.

"Yolanda will be so thankful that you called," says Maria. "She's been worried sick about you."

"I'm fine - just bone-tired. Any word on whether our house is still standing?"

"It was when she left, but I gather she's counting on you for an update."

"I'll see what I can find out. I've got orders to get some rest now, and then be back on duty in a little less than four hours. Tell her it looks like

things have started to turn a corner, at least in my little part of the big picture."

Maria wishes Joe luck and agrees to keep passing on their messages. Waiting with his crew for a ride to the Cal Fire station, he talks to one of the firefighters from Big Creek. Although the fire crews have been successful in stopping the fire's advance along Highway 168, they're not through yet. A major blaze is still stomping around in the country behind Stevenson Mountain. Air attack, bulldozers, and backfire lines are all being used against it.

Eventually the Forest Service patrol pickup drops him and his fellow firefighters off at the impromptu Cal Fire station fire camp. By then it's almost more than Joe can do to stagger across the parking area and plop down on a cot. No sooner does his head hit the pillow than he's sound asleep.

And, it seems to him, almost as quickly three and a half hours have passed. One of his crewmates is shaking him awake for the return trip to the fire line. Under a heavily overcast evening sky through which thunder rumbles in the distance, he grabs coffee and a sandwich, to suck down on the drive back to the line.

This time, he and his crew will be cutting firelines around the base of Stevenson Mountain. They can see fire at the top of that mountain as they pull off Highway 168. As they pull to a stop, get out, and grab their Pulaskis, fire shovels, and McLeods, he feels a cool breeze blowing. It's out of the northeast - and against the direction of the fire.

Trekking up the mountainside, he realizes that the forest here is more parklike than he expected. Whoever owns this land has thinned and control-burned it within the last few years. Even the canopy is broken enough that, when the first drizzle begins to fall, he feels a single drop, then several as the drizzle becomes a light but steady evening rain.

Cutting and grubbing through resinous low-growing mountain misery, and dirt, and dust, in a rainstorm, might seem like a nightmare to most people, but for Joe it's a dream come true. The rain, the thinned forest, the shifted wind, the fact that the fire will have to climb down Stevenson Mountain to make any headway - all of these add up to the happy likelihood that the fire along this particular front will be mostly contained before morning.

And along with that comes the hope that, at last, Joe might just be seeing his wife again - and maybe even his home - before too very much longer.

EPISODE 11: Smart Work, Dumb Luck

By the end of its third day of operation, the Red Cross Shelter and Evacuation Center in the gym at Sierra High is packed beyond capacity. Despite the best efforts of Red Cross and Emergency Services staff, as well as evacuee/volunteers like Pete and Mary Shaw, the place doesn't smell too good. People are hot, devastated, shocked, grumpy, exhausted, aggrieved, fearful, and hopeful, all at once.

The volunteers providing emergency food and shelter look at least as exhausted as those they are assisting. Even the specially trained Red Cross mental health counselors - brought in to comfort and support those who have lost a lifetime's possessions to the fires - look like they could use a mental health break themselves.

Day after day, Pete has seen around him evacuees on cots, little clusters of families or friends or newly acquainted strangers, people in dozens of tiny impromptu communities. Some are catching sleep, others are clutching wallets and purses with identification, money, check books, credit cards. Still others carry boxes loaded with personal hygiene items, or prescription drugs, or medical supplies. Some carry plastic containers with photo albums, family heirlooms and jewelry, computer back-up disks and hardcopy documents. The more-recently arrived carry in their arms bedding, clothing, children's toys - whatever they could carry away as the evacuation orders pushed them from their homes, ahead of the flames.

Many worry about their pets, with the concern and emotion others reserve for human family members. All talk about their homes, the lives they left off, the lives they will take up - again, but never the same -- once this disaster is over.

By the time the fourth day of the calamity dawns, Pete has learned from rumors and media reports that their misery has much company. The fires ignited by the great dry-lightning event have made refugees of over 900,000

Californians, driving them out of foothill and mountain communities up and down the state. The President has declared a major disaster in all areas of California affected by the wildfires, paving the way for federal money to come to those governments, businesses, and individuals that have suffered losses due to the blazes.

At local Red Cross chapters all over the nation, relatives seeking information on family members housed in California shelters are filling out Disaster Welfare Inquiry forms. Over the internet, aid and assistance is coming in from as far away as Australia through a proliferation of California Fire Disaster "wiki" websites, all coordinating donations of money, time, information, labor, equipment, and other goods.

The fact that California has almost exclusively taken the brunt of the dry-lightning event also has a paradoxical upside. Since the rest of the West has been relatively quiet, there have been firefighting resources available for shifting to the California firefront -- luckily. Hope surges with every report that, at last, those fighting the fires are gaining the upper hand throughout the state.

With the prospect of that statewide success, however, also comes the fear, for so many individuals and families, that they will soon return to find the homes they left are now only ashes and broken stone. Beneath the certain knowledge of the vast statewide calamity lies the great uncertainty of what the

endgame will be for nearly a million Californians - and for many millions more, in their extended families throughout the nation and the world.

In Pete's own family, he and Mary have heard from his older son Billy and daughter-in-law Karen, temporarily and safely housed in Fresno. They have not so far been allowed to return to their place in Sky Harbor, so they as yet know nothing definite about their home's status.

Highway 168 into Clovis is still closed to all but emergency vehicles and personnel, so their younger son, Tom, remains marooned in town. On the phone, however, Tom is hopeful that today he will at last be allowed to return to the foothills, to check their home on Gooseberry and reunite with Jen and the kids at the shelter.

The uncertainty of it all has been particularly excruciating for Mary. She has never been fond of being uprooted, and the whole business has been an emotional rollercoaster for her. Every good weather or fire report heightens her hopes, every bad one feeds her fears.

"The things we worry about are usually the ones that don't happen," Pete says, trying to comfort her.

"Yeah, but then there are the things we don't worry about that do happen. That's what worries me."

"Which means, logically . . . ?"

"What I should really be worrying about is everything I'm not worrying about," Mary says with a crooked smile. "The only way to make sure absolutely nothing happens is to worry about absolutely everything."

"And that's asking a bit much - even for you, my dear."

As the day goes on, hope seems to be getting the better part of fear. Pete learns from a Cal Fire Public Information Officer that the second and much moister monsoonal flow has dropped enough rain over the higher elevations to free up fire companies that had been fighting blazes around some of the nearby mountain communities.

"Don't get me wrong -- there are still fires burning in the back country," says the Cal Fire PIO, "but the rains in the higher elevations, combined with the sparser populations up there, means a lot of the companies that were fighting wildfires around mountain communities in the central and southern Sierra are now coming down to the foothills. They'll be assisting with the fires still burning in the lower elevations."

Engines of the Shaver Lake and Pine Ridge Volunteer Fire Departments, Pete learns, are among those local companies coming down from the mountains, on standby. He and Mary make their way toward the staging areas, on the off chance of possibly seeing his brother Joe among the standby crews.

When they do see Joe, he's not with an engine and he's not in uniform. He does have his wildland turnouts and all the rest of his personal protective equipment in the gearbag he's carrying. A RELM emergency personnel radio also

crackles from the holster at his belt, from time to time. He looks even more exhausted than Pete feels.

Their sister-in-law Yolanda is with him. They have come down off the mountain together, to try to find Pete and Mary. After they share hugs all around, Pete and Mary hear the good news from Yolanda and Joe. Their house in Shaver Lake has come through it all, largely unscathed.

"Looks like getting that fire-prevention religion paid off for you," Pete says, smiling.

"Or maybe some other kind of religion?" Mary suggests.

Joe gives them a long look, then slowly shakes his head.

"Smart work and dumb luck, as far as I can tell."

"What do you mean?" Pete asks.

"Even though most homes that didn't have the required fire clearances did burn, I have neighbors whose homes were just about as fire-safe and defensible as mine, and they still lost everything. Maybe they forgot to cover a vent in their foundation or attic, but anyone can overlook that kind of detail. Our place survived, and theirs didn't. I don't know why. I can tell you it wasn't because they were 'bad people' that their homes burned down. It wasn't because we're the best of folks that our place survived, either. Can't put it all on faith or works. It was more random than that."

"Luck?" Pete asks. Joe gives him a weary smile.

"No, not just that. You've seen me at a casino - "

"Only once."

"— and that's plenty enough to know that if I didn't have bad luck I'd have no luck at all. The one smart thing Yolanda and I did was work to make our place as fire-safe as we could - in the hopes of improving our odds. Hope for the best, prepare for the worst. It seems to have worked out, this time."

A moment later, Joe takes a radio call. He's being called back to duty on one of the Shaver engines. Before he departs to change into his wildland gear and join his crew, Yolanda gives him a long kiss, but she stays behind with Pete and Mary. She is still with them at the shelter, with Jen and the kids, when they get the good news - and the bad.

The first call comes from their older son and his wife. Auberry Road has been opened. Karen and Billy's place in Sky Harbor has suffered no more damage than the loss of an outbuilding - a small woodshed.

They have barely started to enjoy their relief when they take a call from their younger son, Tom. He tells Pete that 168 has been opened, then asks to speak to his wife. Pete turns the phone over to Jen.

In moments they learn that Tom and Jen's place on Gooseberry has burned to the ground. They have lost everything they left behind.

Before Jen can break down in tears, Pete hurries the kids out of the shelter on the pretext of seeing if they can spot their greatuncle, "Guncle" Joe, before he leaves with his fire engine. Looking back over his shoulder, he

sees Mary comforting a tearful Jen. For the briefest moment, Mary turns to him a face that has worried both too much, and not enough.

Pete walks with his grandson Will at his side, the boy who looked at the satellite images of the fire on TV and saw in them the shape of a great dragon. Pete thinks about that, and about what Joe said.

In a disaster, it is not necessarily the best who lose nothing, nor the worst who lose everything. Somehow, the perfect fear of losing everything and the perfect hope of losing nothing are two sides of the same coin. Flip it and call it. Dragon's heads. Dragon's tails.

The randomness of that will be a comfort to him in the coming days, especially once he learns what has become of their place in Twin Ponds.

EPISODE 12: What To Do Before The Nightmare Comes True -- Again

Pete Shaw listens on the radio as the Governor takes the microphone to address a special joint session of the California legislature in the wake of the recent wildfire events. He is only able to give the Governor half his attention as he, his brother Joe, and his son Billy help Pete frame up the replacement for the section of his house that burned.

Loading a strip of nails into his nail gun, Pete thinks that things could always have been worse. At every level.

Only a third of his home burned - the addition put on the place by a previous owner, and separated from the rest of the house by a set of sliding glass doors. The majority of the house is salvageable and will not need to be rebuilt.

He supposes he should be happy. Instead, he wants to kick himself. If he had just taken care of a couple of very small things, he wouldn't have to be putting forth the time, money, and labor to rebuild this section of his home.

His fault. When he was clearing patio furniture off the deck that evening of the dry lightning storm, just prior to the evacuation, he neglected to remove a smallish, furry, ring-shaped catbed that sat on a metal meshwork patio chair. Mary had placed that cat bed out on the chair over a year earlier, to make a comfortable resting spot for the semi-wild outdoor feline that visited them, now and again.

He overlooked the cat bed because the patio chair on which it sat was shoved up beneath a metal meshwork patio table. From that table a closed shade umbrella protruded. When embers from a flaming tree a hundred yards upwind landed on that overlooked cat bed, the furry ring was quickly transformed into a very receptive fuel bed.

Flaring up, the little blaze caught the closed patio umbrella on fire. Flame laddered up the umbrella to the eaves of the house, which in turn were open, not boxed in. Eventually, the fire from the burning eaves made its way

into an attic vent, and the addition the previous owner put on the place became thoroughly involved in flame.

His mistake and ill-luck were at least balanced somewhat by the good fortune that the fire in the addition had not spread significantly to the rest of their house. That was the scenario the fire inspector from the insurance company gave him, anyway. For want of a nail, the shoe was lost. For want of a shoe, the horse was lost. . . .

Popping in nails with the nail gun and continuing to half-listen to the Governor's speech on the radio, he realizes that much has been lost, but by no means all. Not in his case, not in Fresno County's case, not in California's case.

The Governor is giving the statistics now. The majority of the state's 900,000 evacuees and four hundred and twenty two wildfire-related deaths took place in the south (San Diego, Orange, Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Bernardino Counties) and in the north (Yuba, Nevada, Placer, Sacramento, El Dorado, Amador, and Calaveras Counties). Pete knows that Fresno County has gotten off relatively lightly: four firefighter deaths and eleven civilian casualties.

The families and friends who lost loved ones might - understandably -- not consider that loss to be "getting off lightly."

Pete pauses from his stud-nailing at the Governor's mention of the "dragon in the land." In the two weeks since he and his grandson Will first saw that

image from orbit of California on fire, it's become clear that Will was not the only one to whom that shape of fire resembled a dragon. That image has become emblematic of the entire disaster the dry-lightning storm set in motion.

"The dragon of disastrous wildfire no longer flies above California!" the Governor declares, to the prolonged applause of the assembled legislators.

"True, in a few backcountry places far from human habitation, the dragon still staggers along, dying. We have defeated it for now, but we know it will come again. We must take steps now if we hope to prevent the nightmare we have just lived through from coming true - again."

Pete rejoins Joe and Billy at their nailing as the Governor lays out his plan. Better co-ordination among local, state, and federal agencies. More funding for fire, law enforcement, and emergency services in fire-prone areas - based on need and not just population. Better coordination between the state and insurance companies. . . .

"If we had that already," Billy says, "maybe we could be working on Tom and Jen's place already, and not just yours, Pop."

Pete nods. Tom and Jen's efforts to rebuild their place have become trapped in a maze of insurance company red tape. The big insurers are trying to protect their bottom-lines - an understandable but not a particularly popular position to be in, just now. Tom figures it might be a couple more months before they can start to rebuild.

On the radio, the Governor is continuing to lay out his plan. Stricter enforcement of property-clearing and defensible-space ordinances. Removal of dead plant material and reduction of ladder fuels through the use of handcrews, mechanical mastication, the controlled use of low-intensity fire, the targeted reintroduction of logging and timber sales. . . .

"That'll be a hard sell for the environmentalists," Billy says.

"Well, the environmentalists have their reasons," Joe Shaw says. "They remember all the clear-cutting that took place under the Forest Service in the seventies and eighties, before the agency's mission changed. Nobody with any foresight wants that kind of boardfeet blitzkrieg to happen again. But it's no good being a prisoner of hindsight, either. The whole idea of 'touch no tree for money' just isn't practical, especially with the forests as brushy and overgrown as they are, from a century of fire suppression."

"'Practical' is going to be the problem," Pete says. "Aren't the big trees the ones you want to keep and not cut down - but aren't they also the most profitable ones to cut down?"

"That's right, generally," Joe says. "For hazard fuel reduction you have to go after the brush and the smaller and more spindly trees - the stuff least interesting to loggers."

"So logging's a non-starter?" Billy asks.

"Not at all. Without logging at least some larger trees, there's just not enough money available to return the forests to what they were - before fire

suppression, much less before European contact. You also have to take some larger trees to insure proper forest diversity, spacing, canopy breaks, age-class mix. The proceeds from the sale of those relatively few larger trees could be used to offset the cost of removing the brushy and spindly stuff."

"Then it'll pay for itself?" Pete asks.

"I don't know. I'm not a logger or a forest ecologist - just a volunteer firefighter. Maybe it'll take grants and subsidies to make it all work. Probably creative compromises and lots of careful oversight too, but logging will have to be some part of the solution."

Pete nods and goes back to nailing. In his speech, the Governor has now gone on to talk about more innovative approaches to conditions in the wildland-urban interface and intermix. Stricter zoning controls, based around issues of sustainable water sourcing, fire safety, traffic, building codes, and environmental quality. Expansion of defensible space to one hundred fifty feet around some homes. More fire hydrants. Better signage and road turnouts. More fuel breaks, and better maintenance of those fuel breaks once established.

Even the enlistment of "animal allies" such as goats for the maintenance of those fuel breaks and reduction of potential hazard fuels on the land. Pete's ears perk up when he hears the Governor begin talking about a story he already knows from the local media - the story of Dave Cheney's Fire-Fighting Goats.

"Hey," Billy says, "I know Dave! He lives in Pine Ridge."

Pete nods. The Governor talks about portable lightweight fencing as the "enabling technology" for the modern goatherder. He tells the story of Cheney and his goats working a small hollow near Tollhouse as a part of a fuelbreak cleanup, when the firefront came toward them. Unable to get the goats out in time, Cheney waited out the fire, trusting that the work he and the goats had done already cleared out the fuelbreak enough to allow them to survive the blaze. Cheney and goats had come through their trial by fire unharmed - and proven once again the value of animal-assisted fuelbreak maintenance.

"Having the Governor talk about it should help Dave's business," Billy says.

"No doubt," says Pete, nailing. The Governor is finishing up, laying out a grand vision of a more fire-safe future for California.

"Such a vision can only be achieved if individual citizens take responsibility for their homes and property," the Governor says. "Government at all levels and private enterprises of all sizes can help, but that will not be enough. The unintended consequences of suppressing smaller, natural fires over the past century have been the conditions which contribute to these catastrophically intense and unnatural wildfires we now face. If we want to live in or even simply enjoy wildland, we must take steps now toward returning that wildland to better balance. If you live in wildland, the primary responsibility for protecting your own home is yours - not governments or companies or anyone else. Only through the efforts of all Californians can we

realize the dream of a more fire-safe California - rather than the nightmare of a burned-over one. All of us must work, separately and together, to keep the dragon in the land at bay."

As the Governor's speech ends and the legislators explode into applause, Pete wonders. Memory is short. People forget. Will governments, companies, organizations, and individuals still be so fired up about preventing wildfire five years from now? Ten? Or will enacting real change require yet more disasters?

Whether his fellow Californians will remember and learn from what has happened Pete can't say, but he hopes that at least he and his family have. He goes back to nailing and hammering.

#

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-- Howard V. Hendrix