

Southern California was in a major drought that threatened nearly thirty million inhabitants and wrecked the area's agricultural economy, leading the Metropolitan Water District to offer a prize for the best seawater desalination system.

Spaniard Ranch

By David Celley

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SPANIARD RANCH

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CHAPTER ONE

Dateline: May Second

California was in a years-long drought condition that not only threatened nearly fifty million inhabitants' way of life, but was causing havoc with the state's bountiful agricultural business. In Southern California conditions were especially bad. In an effort to arrest the burdens brought on by repetitive droughts, the Metropolitan Water District, the state agency responsible for distributing water from upstate to Southern California users, decided to conduct a contest to find the best natural water desalination method that could feasibly be developed and deployed. This contest would be open to the public with the winner receiving grants in the tens of millions of dollars to build a production system that would bring additional fresh water to Southern California's Inland Desert.

Dr. Wolfgang Eberhardt, an engineering professor at the University of Southern California, presented a natural desalination project to a meeting of the local chapter of the Sierra Club in the ballroom of a downtown Los Angeles hotel. The short, modestly dressed, bearded, and bespectacled engineer made his way to the speaker's podium with a prepared text in hand accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation. The audience soon zoned in on the man whose invention would be the first one presented in a long while that provided a unique approach to the long-standing nemesis of global warming. The

stakes were high for Dr. Eberhardt—he was stuck in the design stage of his project as he was having problems locating the financial backing needed to get the project developed. He sized up his audience to be primarily ecologically minded businessmen and professional people. It wasn't a gathering of millionaire benefactors necessarily, but it seemed to him that he would be reaching out to the right audience that might someday put him in front of those financiers who could get his project underway.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen of the Sierra Club," Eberhardt began. "Tonight, I would like to introduce to you a new weapon in the war against global warming. It is a tool to deal with the element of the Earth's burgeoning human population, and the ever-increasing scarcity of usable land on which to support future generations."

The screen behind him displayed the first slide of his PowerPoint presentation. "This new invention is known as the 'Rain Enhancer,'" he said. "If successfully deployed, it could become a low-cost process by which we could reclaim desert and arid regions of the earth by providing those areas with a never-ending supply of fresh water. To operate the Rain Enhancer, we would bring seawater from the ocean to the desert and allow solar power to drive evaporation and fill air masses with humidity. This in its own way mimics what Mother Nature does in the first place by bringing humidity off of the Pacific Ocean and pushing it into high mountains where it reaches a watershed, cools, becomes saturated, condenses, and then returns to earth. But very little of this humidity drifts

south of the High Sierra and reaches the southern part of the state. To bring fresh water to the local desert areas, the humidity must get closer to the mountains and then range upwards in elevation to reach a watershed. The earth's water is eternally recyclable as it goes from seawater to freshwater to irrigation usage to cleansing solvent to sewage removal and back to seawater. The goal of the Rain Enhancer is to make this cycle turnover faster in arid regions to support an ever-increasing population and industrial base."

Eberhardt smoothly switched slides. "For the Rain Enhancer to work," he said, "the order of events must unfold as follows: First, seawater would be piped into a selected desert location where it would be queued in reservoirs. The Rain Enhancer would then access the seawater and spread it evenly over concrete plates. The desert sun would cause the water to evaporate leaving only byproducts on the plate. The resulting humidity would be absorbed by an air mass that would rise into the interior mountains near the Nevada border until it reaches cooler temperatures at higher elevations. The cooler temperatures would cause compression to take place pushing the humidity into tiny droplets. The weather patterns would push the air mass up to higher elevations where even cooler temperatures would cause the droplets to become too big for the air mass to hold, forcing it to deliver its load at a watershed. The runoff would make its way back down to lower levels forming streams until it created fresh water reserves in the lower desert."

The next slide put it all together at a high level. “It becomes a huge form of natural water distillation,” he said, summing it up. “Since it relies on sunlight and seawater, it could displace most conventional desalination systems that require major amounts of electricity or fossil fuel energy to produce. The Rain Enhancer is scalable to work in small or large rural areas.”

Eberhardt elaborated on certain portions of the design, but cautioned the audience that it was a novel idea that hadn’t really been put into production on a considerable scale. “The more plates built into the desert, the more evaporation that can take place per hour of sunshine,” he went on to say.

His audience was generally receptive to his ideas and his invention, but some raised doubts about how it could be put into practice. When he reached the end of the presentation, he opened the floor to questions. The first person recognized brought up arguably the most pertinent question of all. “Professor Eberhardt,” he said, “how much do you think it would cost to make an implementation of this system in, say, the desert east of Palm Springs?”

“Aha! I knew the first question would be the hardest one to answer,” Eberhardt said, drawing some chuckles from the audience. “The best part of the answer is that the initial cost of construction would likely constitute more than eighty percent of the overall cost of the system. Once it’s built and operational, the maintenance is relatively small in comparison. The two major variables are seawater and sunshine which as commodities are free. The land in the desert would be cheaper than farmland in the Central Valley or anywhere along the

coast. Try picturing a large shopping or industrial complex that consists of only concrete parking lots and no high-rise buildings. How much would it cost to build that on barren desert land? The Rain Enhancer will require pipelines to be built into the desert location to bring in seawater. This would require a significant cost; however, almost any conventional desalination system would also require extensive pipeline construction to move the resulting fresh water from the desalination plant to reservoirs, sometimes many miles away."

Another member stood up and said, "Wouldn't there be a lot of tricky problems in acquiring the land, even though it's basically desert? I mean, much of the land is owned by the federal government as well as the state. Other tracts of land, including burial grounds and sacred lands, are owned by Native American tribes. The exact location of the watershed that the system is counting on is not known—nobody has tried anything like this before."

"Yes, of course, there could be some sticky land acquisition problems. But you must remember that the Metropolitan Water District has built pipelines all over the place. Nothing seems to get in their way for very long when it comes to getting a pipeline built. As for the optimum location, it would require extensive study of the weather patterns, prevailing winds, and temperatures," Eberhardt said. "However, after some preliminary work, we could find that a lot of different locations somewhere east of Palm Springs might qualify. The higher desert would be preferred as it would be closer to the higher elevations."

Still another member stood up and said, "Do you know how much evaporation will take place? For a given amount of time on any day how much humidity would you expect the system to generate?"

"That would depend on the scale of the implementation—the bigger, the better. But I must say that we don't have any hard data to work with. We are looking for some backing that will enable a prototype to be built and made operational. At that point we can capture a lot of data on such things as evaporation or consumption of seawater per hour."

The same member then said, "You keep using the word 'we.' Do you represent a large organization such as a corporation or other entity?"

"The answer to that is I do not have any large corporate backing—I'm here trying to find some," Eberhardt replied. "When I refer to 'we' or 'us,' I'm talking about myself and my wife. She is just as astute in these matters as I am, I'm proud to say."

Another member was recognized and said, "Won't there be a significant problem with waste removal? I don't think you could just dump it out in the desert anywhere you wanted to."

Eberhardt replied by saying, "Like most desalination processes, the Rain Enhancer will generate tons of brine. It will need to be stored in the desert areas fairly close to the evaporation points until it can be completely dried into salt. When that has been accomplished, it should be bagged up and shipped to a port facility where it can be taken back out to sea and redeposited."

There were a few more questions for Eberhardt, and then the moderator provided the wrap up to the meeting. A hearty round of applause followed along with a few handshakes from well-wishers who admired what he had done so far. For Professor Eberhardt it was just another pitch that he was making to the world to try to find receptive people who liked his ideas. He was standing next to the podium packing up his computer and materials when two members of the audience approached him.

"Pardon me Dr. Eberhardt," the shorter man said. "My name is Gustavo Moretti, and I'm an engineer with the Metropolitan Water District. I work in the Research and Development section. I was impressed with your presentation here tonight, and I wanted to make you aware of a contest that MWD is running for the best method of bringing fresh water to the Inland Desert in Southern California."

Eberhardt's eyes lit right up. "I'm very happy to meet you," he said as he thrust his hand forward for a handshake. "I'm further interested to hear more about this contest you have. Is it going on right now?"

"Yes, it is", Moretti said. "I can give you more details, but first I want to introduce you to my friend and colleague at MWD, Kyle Westlake."

"Of course," Eberhardt said as he shook hands. "I'm pleased to meet you, Westlake."

Westlake then said, "Please call me Kyle."

And directly after that Moretti said, "And please call me Gus. By the way, Kyle is the deputy treasurer of MWD."

"Well, then you are very important," Eberhardt said with a smile.

"The contest is called the 'Inland Desert Water Contest,' and its purpose is to reach out into the scientific and engineering community here in Southern California to generate ideas just like the one you described here tonight," Gus said. "Kyle has more details for you."

The taller deputy treasurer then said. "As you probably know MWD builds and maintains the system of dams, reservoirs, pipelines, and canals that collect fresh water from various sources mostly up north. The water is then shipped south and distributed to areas that have a large population, but do not have sufficient water to support it. To assist this process, MWD tries different approaches toward finding new sources of fresh water such as this contest. The winner would receive a substantial financial grant from MWD to build the system infrastructure, test it, and set up a production system. The decision of which project wins will be made by the Research and Development acquisitions committee of MWD's Engineering Division."

"Oh, this is like a godsend to me, gentlemen," Eberhardt said. "Please tell me, how do I proceed in entering the contest?"

Gus said, "We would like to talk with you further about the Rain Enhancer and perhaps look at your designs. If we think it's doable, both Kyle and I will champion this project through the contest and afterward even if it doesn't win."

"As you heard from tonight's introduction, I am an engineering professor at the University of Southern California.

I have an office in the Olin Hall of Engineering. I would like to invite you both to come visit me there any afternoon and I will show you in great detail how the Rain Enhancer works." He handed both men one of his cards with his contact information.

"We'll take you up on that," Gus said. "Any particular time work best for you?"

"I teach two classes, but after that I usually hang around the office until about five in the afternoon, but I'll meet you there at your convenience."

"Sounds great," Gus said. "You'll be hearing from one or the other of us soon."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Dateline: June Seventh

Wolfgang and Sohela Eberhardt were at home asleep when a crashing noise coming from the front part of the house woke Sohela up.

"Wake up! Wake up!" she shouted to her sleeping husband, but Wolfgang did not wake up easily. Then she noticed a flickering light coming from their living room. She walked over to the open bedroom door and looked down the hall. To her horror she saw that a fire had started in the living room and was spreading rapidly up the curtains to the ceiling.

"Oh my God!" she screamed. She raced back into the bedroom and started to shake Wolfgang to wake him up screaming, "The house is on fire!"

Wolfgang came around and lifted his head up in time to see flashing light through the open bedroom door. He jumped up and ran over quickly to look down the hall. A burst of flame was shooting along the living room ceiling and heading back up the hall towards them. He hustled back into the bedroom and started putting on a pair of jeans, a shirt, and some shoes.

"Put on a robe and some shoes!" he hollered as the roar in the living room picked up its pace. "Don't forget your cell phone."

Wolfgang started to run down the hall, but he was repulsed by the heat from the flames that by now were racing back

towards the bedrooms and bathrooms. He hurried back into the bedroom where Sohela was nearly dressed. He picked up a chair from the corner of the bedroom and threw it through the window. Without saying another word, he picked Sohela up and lifted her out through the open window space.

"Call the fire department!" he shouted above the now roaring conflagration. Then he darted back down the hallway to his office to try to save what he could of his project. He had a fire extinguisher inside the office if he could only reach it in time.

"Wolfgang! Wolfgang!" Sohela screamed as he dashed away out of sight into the center of the smoking, burning house. A light came on in the next-door neighbors' bedroom.

Sohela dialed 911. Shaking like a leaf she screamed into the phone that her house was burning and her husband was trapped inside. The operator calmly asked her where the address was, but Sohela was overcome with hysteria. She again screamed into the phone that her house was burning and her husband was in great danger.

"Ma'am, I need to have your street address," the operator calmly said. Yet again, Sohela screamed into the phone that her house was burning and begged the operator for help.

Hearing the commotion the next-door neighbor lady came out of her house and caught up to Sohela. She quickly realized that Sohela was too hysterical to make any sense on the phone. Gingerly, she took possession of Sohela's phone and told the operator the street address explaining that the house was nearly consumed by fire.

Sohela started bouncing up and down and screaming again, "Wolfgang's inside, Wolfgang's inside."

The neighbor lady then hugged her and carefully lead her away from the burning house. The neighbor's husband raced over to the two women in time to hear that Wolfgang was still inside the burning house. He hustled around to the front yard looking for a garden hose. Finding one, he turned it on to the maximum level and shoved it through a broken window in the living room. He then continued around the house checking each window for any sign of Wolfgang, but did not see him anywhere. He returned to the hose only to find that the heat was so intense he could not stand close to the window at all.

The flames were pouring through the roof and had ignited the tree next to the office window. Burning cinders were filling the night sky. Other neighbors on both sides of the street were awakened by the noise as bedroom and living room lights started turning on. One man came out in his nightclothes to move his car away that was parked in front of the inferno. Before long a crowd of neighbors formed on the other side of the street to watch what was happening.

A short time later, a fire truck arrived, and the firemen began to hose down the house. The next-door neighbor's husband greeted the fire truck and shouted that there was a man still inside the burning house. Hearing this, the fire captain ordered two special duty firefighters to put on extra protective gear and oxygen tanks and go inside the front door to try to find him. While the two firemen were getting ready, another took an axe to the front door to chop his way in. Two more

firemen began hosing the inside down through the smashed living room window as the two special duty firemen entered the living room that was smothered with smoke and nearly gutted by the fire. They searched everywhere they could throughout the house, but there was no sign of Wolfgang anywhere.

Additional resources arrived, and powerful firehoses soon dampened the fire from the roof down. Within thirty minutes of the firefighters' arrival, the fire was completely out. Although the damaged walls were still holding up the heavily damaged roof, the house had been virtually destroyed. Luckily, the only collateral damage impacted the tree right next to the house, and not any other nearby structures.

The fire captain came over to where Sohela and the neighbors were standing and said calmly, "We went inside to look for the guy still in there, but we haven't found him yet. We'll still keep looking, but there's a lot of damage to sort through and it's still hot. It might take hours to check everywhere."

Hearing this, Sohela collapsed in a heap. Both the neighbor lady and her husband picked her up and led her away to their house. She started wailing. She twisted and turned to try to go back to the virtually destroyed house, but the neighbors succeeded in leading her away.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Eberhardt," the neighbor lady said reassuringly. "When the firemen find your husband, they'll bring him over here. Besides, you know that we can't do anything about it. We'll only be in their way."

Once inside the neighbor's living room, Sohela collapsed on the sofa. With the neighbor lady next to her, she began to settle down.

It was just after daylight when the firemen found Wolfgang's body. His back was broken and severely burned by parts of the roof that had collapsed on him. He had crawled from some point in the living room all the way to the main bathroom in an apparent effort to get into the bathtub and turn on the water. He was hanging onto the front of the tub reaching for the handle to the faucet. His lifeless face still reflected the horror and anxiety of his ordeal.

Before he left home for work, Kyle got a call from his father, Gilbert, who routinely monitored the airwaves and websites of emergency services as a part of his law practice. "I just found out from a fire department website that Eberhardt's house in Silver Lake caught fire and burned down," Gilbert said. "There was one fatality—Eberhardt."

"Jesus!" Kyle exclaimed. The news got him up off his seat at the breakfast table like the shock of an earthquake. "How in the hell did that happen?"

"There's not much else I can tell you at this point," Gilbert said. "The fire department doesn't know what started it yet. I hate to roust you around at this time of the day, but I thought you should be made aware of it."

"Oh, I'm definitely glad you called," Kyle said. "I'll head over their right away. I'll let you know what I find out."

Kyle hurried over to where the Eberhardt's had lived to talk to Sohela and survey the damage. He couldn't go into the

burned out remains, but he was referred to the next-door neighbors to find Sohela. She was sitting in the living room much calmer now, but still being consoled by the neighbor lady.

"I just found out what happened. I'm so very, very sorry," Kyle began, reaching over and clasping her hand in his. "It goes without saying that I will miss Wolfgang, but I want you to know that Gus and I will continue to pursue the project, both in the contest, and afterward. We're not going to let something like this stop us, no matter how serious it is."

"Oh, thank you, thank you, Kyle," Sohela said with a sorrowful look on her face. "I thought that my entire life had just been destroyed. I'm forever grateful that you and Gus can still help me pursue my dream."

"We can never replace Wolfgang, but we can pick up where he left off," Kyle said. "And we'll stick to it until it's finished."

At that moment both Omar and Ayesha walked through the front door. They ran directly over to where Sohela was sitting and formed a three-way embrace.

Kyle again eulogized Wolfgang for the work he had done, and exchanged contact information with Omar and Ayesha as well as Sohela. While Omar and Ayesha were discussing what had happened with the neighbors, Kyle went over to the burned-out ruins to see if anything relating to the project could be salvaged. He was met by a plain clothes officer who was looking into the fire's origins.

"Pardon me," Kyle began, "but is there any chance I can browse the remains? I'm acting on behalf of Mrs. Eberhardt and her family with regard to any information the homeowner may have had about a project he was designing."

The officer turned around to Kyle and said, "I'm Bob Gallagher from the Fire Department Arson Division. Who are you, and what is it you want to find in this rubble here?"

"I'm Kyle Westlake. I work for the Metropolitan Water District. Mr. Eberhardt was an engineer who designed a project I'm sponsoring that will provide a low-cost method of desalinating sea water. He had most of the designs in an office in his home. If I could just browse for a while, I'm hoping that some of it still might still be there intact."

"I'm an arson investigator," Gallagher said. "This fire was deliberately started with an accelerant. That's why I was called to this site, and that's what makes it a crime scene. Can you think of any reason why somebody would want to torch a residence like this?"

"Well," Kyle began, "the project I just mentioned was in the semifinals of a contest at MWD to discover a viable water desalination system."

"A contest? What does the winner get?"

"There could be millions of dollars of grants that the project owners could use to build and deploy a desalination system for MWD."

Gallagher looked back at the burned-out house for a moment. "And you think that somebody set this fire to destroy the designs of one of the projects?" he said.

"That could be a possibility," Kyle said, also looking at the burned-out house. "Since you've discovered that the fire was deliberately set, that means there has to be a reason behind it. Do you know for sure how the fire started?"

"The arsonist used some device that ignited a chemical accelerant. A neighbor said she heard a smashing sound like a window was broken. It appears from the way the burn went through the structure that the main living room window was smashed, and the device was dropped through where it would ignite and set off the curtains.

"I see," Kyle said. "I just can't imagine why anybody would want to kill Eberhardt. He was a brilliant man trying to do a good thing for all of us."

Gallagher looked back at Kyle and said, "Well, we don't know yet if the arsonist had in mind to kill anyone or just destroy the house."

"I can say that the designs are surely important to us. Can I still take a look through there?"

"Let's go talk to the widow first," Gallagher said.

Understanding that Sohela was still in the midst of her grief, Gallagher rendered his condolences and tactfully asked her if it would be all right if Kyle looked inside the ruins to salvage anything related to the Rain Enhancer project. She confirmed it would be okay to search the remains, and that Kyle was indeed the project's sponsor.

Gallagher's assistant, Andy Prescott, had blocked off the area with yellow police marking tape to indicate that it was a

crime scene. Carefully Gallagher and Kyle maneuvered around the tape and stood inside what was once the living room.

"Were you ever in here before the fire?" Gallagher asked.

"Yes, I was, a couple of times." Kyle said. "The most important time was when the Eberhardt's invited my colleague, Gus Moretti, and me over for dinner one night a few weeks ago. Wolfgang showed us the model he made of the project, and the designs he had developed."

"Where was all of that located?"

"This was the living room where we are standing right now," Kyle said. "To the right over there was the hallway leading to the bedrooms and bathrooms. The first room on the right in that hallway he used as an office and kept everything in there."

Kyle walked Gallagher through the steps that a person would have taken from the living room to the office. "It should have been right in here," he said.

They looked around at the mess that remained. The furniture was nothing more than charred ash. The model of the Rain Enhancer was completely destroyed. Any business documents or designs that had been out of the file cabinet were incinerated. The file cabinet itself was melted badly by the heat of the blaze. He peered inside the mangled drawers and saw nothing but ash.

"This looks like the remains of the file cabinet where he kept the documentation," Kyle said.

Gallagher could see only melted, burned up metal in a heap. “I don’t think you’ll be able to retrieve anything from that,” he said.

Kyle bent over and picked up a charred piece of the table sized model. “This looks like what’s left of his model,” he said.

They browsed for a short while longer. Kyle then said, “Can you tell me how it was that Wolfgang was killed? I mean, Sohela made it out of the house, but he didn’t. I was just wondering why.”

“The fire department found him in the master bathroom,” Gallagher said. “An autopsy has not been performed yet, but the cause of death appears to be smoke inhalation.”

“I see,” Kyle said. “If that’s the case, wouldn’t it mean that he was not the target after all?”

“Maybe,” Gallagher said. “But we’re only beginning this investigation. There’s quite a lot of work still to do.”

Sohela moved with her remaining belongings to her sister’s house in Glendale. A few days later, Kyle visited her and introduced her to Gilbert with an offer to settle their estate. Sohela agreed to have Gil settle Wolfgang’s estate saying that they had insurance, but neither one of them had a will. Gil discussed a few matters particularly about the intangible assets of the yet-to-be-built project. He gathered up other information about their banking accounts, insurance, and any personal property that was not involved in the fire. Satisfied that he had retrieved all he needed, he and Kyle got into the car and left.

“Since neither of them had a will, the settlement will have to go through probate,” Gil said as he drove down the freeway

toward Orange County. “That will take some time and cost a lot.”

“I think you’re worried about getting paid. Remember, she said they both had insurance.”

“I’m concerned because I’ll have to farm out the estate work.”

“You mean nobody in your firm does any estate work?” Kyle said, his attention piqued.

“It’s no problem. I know someone who does,” Gil said. “I’m wondering how to manage some of the expenses that will crop up in the interim.”

“We may have to front some of the costs and get reimbursed later.”

“What do you mean when you say ‘we’?” Gil said. “Don’t you mean ‘me’?”

“OK, I mean ‘you’,” Kyle said. “You may have to prime the pump a little, but there should be an ample amount of legal business in it for you.”

“Are any of the project outputs such as the designs patented? It might be hard to get a patent if we don’t have any detailed designs to put with it.”

“Not to worry. Gus, my partner, has probably enough technical information for a patent. I’ll talk it over with him to see what he has, and what might still be needed.”

“Who will own the project rights? Sohela seems a likely candidate, but with no will…”

"l may have to stand in as the owner," Kyle said. "I'm the sponsor who represents the project in front of the MWD R and D acquisitions committee."

"It could be very important. The judge might want to know who will run things with Eberhardt gone. If it's you, he'll want to know if the widow agrees to that."

"I think she'll be on board with that," Kyle said. "Although I suppose we'll need to ask her."

"So, you better put that on your plate then, and get it in writing."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Dateline: September Twenty-Seventh

Following GPS directions on his cellphone, Kyle turned south from Ventura Street in Fillmore looking for Guiberson Road that should be just a few miles ahead of him. This would enable him to flank the portion of the highway closed by the fire and continue on unabated to Valencia. However, in rerouting him, the GPS was not able to account for the progress the fire had made in the last half hour.

The traffic heading south out of Fillmore was moving in the direction of Moorpark. Kyle wondered if there would be another hospital down there that he could find quicker than the one in Valencia. He tried browsing through his phone apps to see if his theory was right, but before he could find out anything, he had come to Guiberson Road and had to make a decision. In that there was a hospital for sure in Valencia, and it was only about half an hour away, he decided to make the turn east on Guiberson Road and head toward Valencia.

At least the traffic was minimal on Guiberson Road. However, the smoke was slowly intensifying. The road east had mostly farmland on the left, but woods and grassy canyons on the right which made perfect fuel for a wildfire. Beyond the farmland was the Santa Clara River which was basically a dry gulch this time of year. The river bed was littered with patches of growing brush that likewise made good fuel. They continued

on through the increasingly intense smoke toward Torrey Canyon Road that would take them back up to route 126 just south of Piru.

Past Wiley Canyon, the farmlands disappeared as the road ventured between the river bed on the left and the grassy wooded area on the right. Then his worst nightmare came to pass as they came to where the fire had burned down into the dry river bed and was also burning on the grassy canyon side of the road with flames reaching as much as twenty feet in height. The smoke was so thick Kyle couldn't see the road ahead further than fifty feet. Burning cinders were flying in their direction like tracer bullets, but the fire hadn't cut Guiberson Road just yet.

Kyle stopped for reconnaissance to reassure himself that he and his passenger could make it through. "Jesus, look at that," he muttered as he stared in awe out through the windshield. The flames were roaring back at him from both sides of the road.

Skylar looked petrified. She tried to speak but could only make a grunting noise.

In an instant Kyle saw that there was just enough of an opening for them to cut through the flames. He clasped Skylar's hand and said, "Hang on, we're going through."

As they gingerly proceeded forward, the wind picked up dramatically. When they drove around a bend, just in front of them appeared a burning vortex—a tornado of fire.

"God Almighty!" Kyle exclaimed as he screeched to a halt and then began to backup out of the way, only to see that the

wind and the fire had intensified behind them as well, and a burning tree had broken in half across the road blocking them in. However, the spot on the road where the SUV was standing was surprisingly clear for the moment.

"We're going to have to sit tight and wait it out," he shouted with the fire roaring nearly all the way around them. He looked at Skylar and saw that her eyes were as wide open as tennis balls while she looked straight into the menacing vortex.

Suddenly and without warning Skylar screamed at the top of her lungs holding onto the sides of her head. She quivered as she looked in terror at the firestorm facing them as if in a standoff.

Kyle nearly jumped out of his seat. Anxiously he looked over at Skylar who was still shuddering. Then seeing that she covered her face with her hands and slumped down in her seat, he called out to her. No answer. He called out again. Again, no answer. He reached for her right hand and held it long enough to take her pulse. It was still beating rapidly. Afraid that she might be in her last moments, he nonetheless pressed on.

It turned out that this particular spot was the only place where the fire had jumped the road thus far. As if some miracle had happened, the vortex drifted to the right onto the grassy side, creating space enough for them to pass through. In a matter of seconds, they were away from the roaring flames as the fire was swiftly burning in the opposite direction.

A few minutes later they approached the intersection of Guiberson Road and Torrey Canyon Road where he needed to

turn to left to get back to route 126. The fire was still burning out of control off the right side of the road. A man who appeared to have been trapped by the fire was deliriously waving his hands over his head for Kyle stop. He was on the opposite side of the road from the fire and there was no other traffic around. Kyle pulled to a stop and rolled the window partially down to see what the matter was.

"It's gonna blow! It's gonna blow!" the man yelled, waving his arms wildly in front of him for Kyle to get out of the way.

"What's gonna blow?" Kyle hollered back above the roar of the fire.

The man backed away and pointed down the road toward the intersection. "Chemical Plant!" he yelled again. "Get out now!"

"Holy shit, a chemical plant!" Kyle exclaimed. Before he could shift into reverse, a thunderous explosion from the intersection rocked the SUV back and forth and turned it partially around on the road. The man was blasted over fifty feet into a ditch near the dry river.

Kyle sat in the driver's seat momentarily stunned. The road was littered with debris and a roaring plume of flame shot up from the remnants of a building on the other side of the intersection. They were just a few feet outside of the blast zone. His nerve came back to him and he drove gingerly around the smoldering debris on the road to the intersection with Torrey Canyon Road. He turned left and headed toward route 126.

They were now driving north across the dry river away from Guiberson Road where the fire was burning. It would be

a few short minutes and they would finally be heading east on the main highway. But they got to the intersection with route 126 only to find that the highway was closed again! This time the shutdown was to the east as the fire was burning in Piru Creek—another dry gulch. It was threatening the bridge on route 126 that crossed Piru Creek backing the eastbound traffic for several miles.

Not about to give up, Kyle turned to his GPS one more time to find out where he could go. He observed that Piru Creek had another bridge crossing it at Center Street in Piru. He couldn't tell for sure, but he reckoned that the fire had already passed that bridge. They might be able to get across it if it was still intact. He rerouted his journey north up through the small farming community of Piru, to Center Street and east again in the direction of the main highway. When they reached the middle of town, he found that the flames were still roaring around. The authorities hadn't closed that street yet apparently because they were too busy with other places where the danger was worse. Some drivers ran off the road because they couldn't see through the smoke. Others were just too scared to move, and the traffic came to a standstill. The fire was closing in on them but helicopters came to the rescue and pounded the sides of the road with water.

Center Street soon became impassible requiring Kyle to redirect down a few blocks away and then double back up on a different street to get around the fire that was now moving southwest of Piru Square. When he reached Center Street on the other side, he turned to the right to head east across the

bridge. He saw that flames were leaping up on both sides of the bridge from the dry gulch below it. Then through the smoke he saw what looked like an airplane bearing down directly on him as though it were going to crash.

"Oh my god, I don't believe this," Kyle said. "That plane's gonna crash on top of us!"

Skylar was nearly out of it collapsed in the passenger seat. Owing to the more desperate nature of her injuries, he pressed the SUV forward onto the bridge. The plane turned out to be a Super Scooper and it bombed the flames on the side of the bridge next to them with water splashing onto the bridge and roadway. The suddenly wet road surface and force of the splash caused Kyle to spin out and crash against a bridge abutment.

Kyle's SUV took a hard hit near the rear. He got out into the nearly knee-deep runoff to check for damage determining that it was fortunately minimal. He went further around to the passenger side to check on Skylar. He could tell that she was not injured further by the accident, but was still badly needing medical attention for her other injuries. She appeared to be struggling to stay alive.

When Kyle returned to the driver's seat to crank the SUV up, it wouldn't start. He tried several more times, but he couldn't get the engine to turn over. He opened the hood and out came a lot of smoke. He feared the worst, but he soon realized that this was just water vapor from the splash hitting his hot engine. He opened the back seat of the SUV and pulled a tee shirt out of his gym bag. With that, he gingerly brushed away and mopped up most of the water. He closed the hood,

went back to the driver's seat, and tried again to restart the engine. After a few attempts it finally started.

The water runoff had subsided, but the flames continued to roar on both sides of the bridge. It dawned on Kyle that the fire might also be roaring underneath the bridge, and they better get off of it in a hurry. After crossing to the other side, he looked back through the rearview mirror and saw the bridge collapse into the fire below it just as a pickup truck was trying to cross it behind them.

"My god, did you see that!" he said out loud. He shuddered for a moment realizing that they both nearly fell into an inferno like hell itself. Finally, they drove out of the smoke, and it became apparent that the fire was at last burning behind them. Kyle drove a few more miles and then he saw route 126 which was nearly empty heading east owing to the road closure on the south side of Piru. He turned onto route 126, and with the wide-open road in front of them it was finally full speed ahead to the Santa Clarita Valley and the hospital at Valencia.

The scars of the fire could be seen everywhere. Cars and trucks were strewn all along the roadside on the westbound lanes some still burning while others were just smoking hulks. The canyon to his left was a charred-out field of ashes and the burnt stubble that remained of shrubs and trees. There were only a few signs of firefighters working on smoldering fires, or ambulances taking away burn victims. Kyle was still a little dazed from his ordeal, but he kept the speed up to get Skylar to the hospital in Valencia as soon as he could.

The world seemed normal once again as they drove down through Valencia to Henry Mayo Memorial Hospital, pulling up to the emergency room. Skylar had lapsed into unconsciousness. Not waiting for help, he gingerly unbuckled her and picked her up off the passenger seat of the SUV gently carrying her in his arms into the emergency room. The staff there immediately placed her on a gurney and began to revive her. After briefly checking her burns, they discovered that she had a broken collar bone as well as a broken leg. Her burns appeared to be serious, and they hurried her down to the burn center.

Kyle went through the admin process at the emergency room admitting desk providing the information that they needed to admit Skylar from her wallet that he retrieved from her jeans pocket. Then, after running on high octane for several hours, he sat down and waited. His anxiety wouldn't leave him alone, however, and he jumped up periodically to ask the duty nurse if she had any information. He finally apologized after the third attempt saying that he had just driven through the middle of the fire to get there. It was 6 PM when the doctor finally emerged from the burn center to report on Skylar's condition.

"Are you the burn patient's husband?" the doctor said.

"No, we're just friends from work," Kyle said, after jumping up out of his seat.

"Please sit back down, and I'll explain her condition", the doctor said. "She has a few severe burns that cover about five to ten percent of her body. Most of it is on her right flank, but

they affect her back, her shoulder and also her arm. Down on her leg there are some less serious burns just below her hip. She has a compound fracture of her collar bone and a broken fibula in her lower right leg with another fracture just above the ankle. In addition, she suffered a concussion as something hit her in the head. She is in stable condition and resting comfortably."

"I see. It sounds like she's banged up pretty bad," Kyle said, although he was relieved to know that her injuries did not appear to be life threatening.

The doctor then said, "She will need surgery for the burns and also for the broken limbs. We put temporary braces around the leg and shoulders to keep them stable. This hospital is not equipped to handle skin grafts, so all we could do was apply sterile dressings to the burn areas to block infection. Time is of the essence. She needs to go to the ER of a major medical center as soon as possible."

"I can put her into the back seat of my car and get her down to UCLA right away," Kyle said.

"That would not be advisable," the doctor said. "Her condition is extremely delicate. She needs to be put into an ambulance."

They went over to the admitting desk to check on ambulance availability. The admitting nurse said, "Because of the fire, it'll be hard to find an ambulance. Let me check." She spoke to another nurse and a moment later she returned. "An ambulance just brought in a patient a short time ago," she said. "It might still be here."

"Let's go check," Kyle said. He and the doctor walked out of the Emergency Room entrance just in time to see an ambulance starting to pull away. Quickly, Kyle raced around in front of the ambulance, raising up his hands, and shouting frantically for them to wait while he back peddled into the street. As the ambulance screeched to a halt, the doctor hurried over to the driver's side and explained that he had a burn victim that needed transport right away. Within a few more minutes Skylar was in the back of the ambulance and on her way to the UCLA Medical Center Emergency Room.

Kyle followed the ambulance down the freeway to Westwood. He met up with Skylar still on the gurney as they rolled her into a doctor's station. A trauma doctor checked Skylar out and said that they needed to get her into the burn center immediately for surgery.

Kyle sat and waited in the emergency room for three and a half hours. Finally, a nurse came out and said, "She's in serious but stable condition. She'll need more surgery as her recovery permits. Right now, she's resting in a recovery room. She'll need to stay here as an in-patient until the bone surgery and skin grafts are complete and she's recovered enough to walk. I don't know how long that will be, but it could be several weeks."

"Thanks for the update," Kyle said. He then collapsed back into the chair where he was sitting. A few minutes later, he revived himself and left the hospital. As he slowly dragged himself back to the SUV, he realized that it was twenty past 11

PM, and he hadn't had anything to eat since coffee and toast for breakfast.



Southern California was in a major drought that threatened nearly thirty million inhabitants and wrecked the area's agricultural economy, leading the Metropolitan Water District to offer a prize for the best seawater desalination system.

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