

# CHAPTER 1



MONDAY, JULY 23, 2018  
A FOREST IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA  
AROUND 8:00 A.M.

Josh stared in horror at the bloodred glow rising up behind him. A massive wildfire was raging through the forest, a wall of flames devouring everything in its path. Josh and his cousin Holly were in a race for their lives.

“Josh!” Holly shouted, grabbing his hand.  
“This way!”

As they took off along the forest path, the hot

wind gusted hard. Suddenly the air was filled with sparks and glowing embers and chunks of flaming wood. Josh felt them landing on his bare arms and legs, sizzling against his skin, searing his scalp. He tried to brush them away. But they were all over him, biting into his skin like the white-hot teeth of a flesh-eating monster.

He and Holly ran faster, but the wall of flames was closing in from behind. And all around them, the burning embers were setting fires wherever they landed.

On treetops.

*WHOOSH!*

On branches.

*WHOOSH!*

On the forest floor.

*WHOOSH! WHOOSH! WHOOSH!*

With every gust of wind, more embers swirled. Flames shot higher and higher into the sky. A nightmare of sounds crashed against Josh's ears. The fire's roar, the moaning wind, the cracking and snapping of the trees. It was as though the air itself was shrieking in agony.

Josh glanced around, struggling to breathe in the thickening smoke. Just minutes before, the forest had been peaceful and green. Now it was a terrifying maze of fire.

How could everything change so fast?

And then:

*Boom!*

A burning pine tree in front of them exploded. Shards of splintered wood sprayed out. Holly tried to pull Josh sideways, but Josh stumbled. When he looked up, there was a flaming branch speeding through the air.

It was headed straight for his skull.