

EVACUATION ORDER

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CHAPTER

ONE

An eighteen-wheel semitruck rumbles down the California state highway, maintaining an easy speed. The driver sips coffee from a thermos mug—she is almost halfway through her twelve-hour shift and looking forward to delivering her load of farm equipment. Her first stop is a farm equipment warehouse in the Central Valley. After that, she'll head north to Mount Shasta to deliver the rest of the haul. Then it's just a few short hours on the road and she'll be home sweet home for several days of rest and family time.

The driver has been on the road for six weeks, and she is looking forward to meals that don't come in a bag, sitting on the sidelines at her kids' soccer games, and sleeping in her own bed.

Traffic slows slightly, and the driver downshifts, singing along to Bonnie Raitt. By the end of the song, traffic has smoothed out and the driver accelerates again. As the truck rounds a bumpy curve, a pair of chains hanging off the back of the trailer come loose, striking the pavement.

In the cab, the driver can't see or feel the loosened chains dragging behind the trailer. She takes another sip of coffee. The outside temperature has climbed to 98 degrees. This heat wave has lasted for over a week and she's grateful for her AC. Without it, she'd melt like a candle. Still, she'd rather drive in the heat than in snow or rain, even though she knows California could *really* use some precipitation. The dry, dry hills and seemingly endless drought are scary.

Pushing the thought from her mind, the driver slips into the passing lane and eases the semi past another big truck. As she moves back into the right-hand lane, a gust of wind kicks up a handful of tumbleweeds. Freed from their root stems, the round skeletons of desert plants bounce and roll across the highway, shaking loose and scattering seeds.

The soccer ball-sized tumbleweeds are tiny compared to the semi, and the truck rolls right over them. The spark that ignites one of the dry tufts when it meets the dragging chains is small, too. Too small for the driver to notice. But it is enough. The driver doesn't see the wisp of smoke, or the small flames that begin to crackle and grow. She continues down the highway with her load. The smoldering orbs drift onto the shoulder, where long-bladed clusters

of dead grass have taken root. The tall, dry blades are exactly what the little fire needs to grow. Embers catch. Leap. Snap and sizzle.

Inside a Subaru several cars behind the truck, someone notices the fire growing on the side of the road and makes a 911 call.