

CHAPTER 24

Black Mountain

From the air, we looked down on a landscape of charred trees and earth. The mountainsides were scorched. Fires dotted the canyons where snags still burned after the flames had passed. A few remaining pockets of green and brown showed life in deep creases of the land.

The skids of the helo barely touched ground and dropped nine of us on a rocky plateau near the ridge on Black Mountain. We unloaded our daypacks, tools, food and water, and the chainsaw. The area was just big enough for a staging point for our limited supplies. We stood at the top of a rugged canyon and watched the underside of the helo lift away. Looking down, we saw Pine, Oak, Sumac, Manzanita, chaparral and scrub brush growing together in a dense maze. Rocky outcrops interrupted the steep slope into the valley.

It was still morning. A light breeze blew ash across the side of the mountain. A plume of gray smoke reached thousands of feet into the Central California sky. From our vantage point, the massive Pozo Fire was a sobering sight, burning across mountains and through canyons. It moved along the floor of the valley below in our direction, consuming everything in its path. Bears, coyotes, deer, squirrels, lizards, snakes and all manner of wildlife in the Las Padres fought for life, fleeing the fire and smoke. Fish would be poached in their streams as the flames passed over. Across the valley, crews were cutting line with a D-6. It would be easier work down there, on flat ground, with a bulldozer to scrape out a wide firebreak.

We stood around TB as he briefed us on strategy and organized our effort. Our job was to cut a line to prevent the Pozo Fire from running up the canyon and over into the next valley. "This spot is our safe zone and anchor point," he said. "We'll cut an indirect line, across and down, and fire it out. Three feet wide, no slopover." Putting the toe of his boot on the Stihl, he said, "Jake, you take the chainsaw and start cutting trees and stumps. Red Eye, you be his buckler. I'll work the head of the line and do some scouting as we work our way down. Greg, you're behind me. Luis, Raphael, Hector and Art, in that order. Dozer, you be the lookout. There's a Forest Service spotter over there," he said, pointing across the valley. "Stay in touch with him. Blue channel. Everyone understand what we're doing? Any questions?"

We started clearing a line down to the mineral soil, hacking and scraping. Everyone else was energetic after a night's sleep and a warm breakfast. I felt tired and was having difficulty concentrating. The

roar of the chainsaw nearby discouraged conversation and I was glad for that. I focused on cutting the fireline. The brush was thick and we made limited progress. The head of the fire continued to burn on the valley floor, hot spots and fingers of flame now visible on the lower edges of the canyon.

I tried to comprehend my father's death. Now I wouldn't have to worry about what he thought. There would be no more criticism or hostility. There would be nothing. He was gone. I tried to understand my feelings. I looked into a black void, no light, no reflections, and no revelations. I thought of the incident on Yankee Jim Road. Someone wiped from the face of the earth. I swung my Pulaski. I felt numb.

TB sent me back to the safe zone to get a cubic of water and climbed part way up with me to get a better view. He radioed to Dozer and the Forest Service spotter. "We're not going anywhere," he said. "I'm going to scout a route to side-hill in at a sharper angle and anchor into the rock in the middle of the canyon. At this rate it'll take forever."

"You're okay to do that," the spotter replied, "but watch the terrain, it looks steep farther down."

I brought one of the five-gallon water containers back down the line and the crew filled their canteens. We continued to cut our way across and down the side of the canyon. In places, the brush was ten feet high. As we worked, the footing became more difficult. From time to time, we talked to Dozer on the squirrel channel. He moved around near the top of the ridge, trying to get the best view of what we were doing on the mountainside below.

TB put his shovel down and said, "I want a closer look farther down." Radio in one hand, he set off through the brush. Minutes later, he radioed back, "It's getting steep down here, I don't know if we can pull this off." Spread out along the line, we stopped for a break, put down our packs, opened our brush jackets, and drank water. Jake silenced the chainsaw below us. Despite the low humidity, the cotton under our fire suits collected sweat and I was soaking wet. Maybe Jake had the right idea, it would be nice to have short sleeves. I ate the banana I had stuffed into my webbing. The heat had already turned it brown and mushy.

Raphael, standing next to me, turned his face toward the sky and said, "Did we just get a wind shift?"

"I don't know," I said. Turning my head, I thought maybe I felt a difference. "Yeah, I think we did." I sensed a change, but wasn't sure what was happening.

We stood in the thick brush, trying to see what was going on below. Without warning, the change in the wind became obvious as it began to blow up slope into our faces. A spot fire at the bottom of the canyon

appeared out of nowhere and erupted into a blaze. In seconds, we saw orange flames begin a run up the canyon. A cloud of black smoke rose from the flames. I heard the fire chief from Washington warning, "Never forget to watch for weather changes and be aware of your situation at all times. If there's a blow up, you'll have thirty, maybe sixty seconds to get out."

Our radios began to crackle. The lookout across the canyon warned us, "The fire has turned up slope, move out, move up to the safe zone!" Up the line, Dozer and Art began calling on the squirrel channel, "Get out!"

Puffs of smoke and fingers of fire were now clearly visible below. A rush of fear and disorientation washed away my lethargy. I realized the entire side of the mountain had been preheated and was about to explode into flames. Trying to regain my composure, I shouted to TB, Jake and Red Eye below me, "Move out! Safe zone! Safe zone!" Where were they? I couldn't see them. My first thought was to get down to them, but they had radios. They would know what they had to do. I felt a spike of fear, a surge of adrenaline, which started in my stomach and rushed through my body. It seemed like forever until I caught sight of Jake and Red Eye emerging from the brush, Jake was carrying the Stihl. They were coming up. Why did Jake still have the saw? Where was TB?

I knew I had to get up to the safe zone as fast as possible. I started to move back up the line we had cleared. It looked insignificant, a three-foot wide cut through acres of thick brush. I dropped my daypack. It took my fire shelter with it as it fell to the ground. The footing going uphill was treacherous and running was impossible. The side of the canyon was steeper than I realized on the way down. The ground was covered with small rocks, shale, and bits of granite, which slipped away as I tried to climb.

I looked below again and saw a wall of flames eighty or ninety feet high. Black smoke, the result of incomplete combustion and a sure sign of a fast moving fire, billowed up. Jake realized how close the flames were. He dropped the saw and began to move faster up the fireline. Red Eye struggled behind him. Below Red Eye, I saw TB's yellow Nomex in the brush. "Run, TB, run," I shouted. I knew he couldn't hear me. The oncoming fire roared like a freight train and filled my ears as it consumed trees, brush and oxygen.

A finger of flame made a run uphill on one side and was now above us. A fire whirl, fifty-feet high, came out of the flames and spun around, spewing burning branches and smoke before it was sucked back into the firestorm. The superheated air, carbon monoxide gases and thick smoke hit me. I tried to control my breathing and take shallow breaths as I moved, but the exertion was too great. I needed air and I

couldn't get it. My eyes began to burn. My legs felt like rubber. In the panic, my shroud remained tucked up under my helmet and my goggles on top of it.

Glancing back again, I thought I saw TB's yellow brush jacket and bare head. He disappeared into the wall of advancing flames. I struggled up the hillside as fast as I could, slipping again and again onto my hands and knees. Through the smoke, I saw other yellow figures above, moving in the same direction, each clawing his way to the plateau. The back of my neck, my ears, and my bare wrists were stinging from the heat. Gasping, my eyes were slits, tears streamed down my cheeks. My leg muscles screamed with pain from the climb. I knew if I fell or slid back, I would die. Sparks showered around me, and I felt the suck of the air being drawn away as the flames consumed the last of the oxygen.

I thought I had just a few seconds to live. I forgot about the rest of the crew. Survival instinct took over. I had tunnel vision as I concentrated on getting to the ridge. Each second became a minute. I was in a place between life and death. As I pushed my body and struggled to breathe, thoughts and images flashed through my mind. I lay exhausted, face down on the hockey rink after a practice, the cold ice smooth against my cheek. My father stood in the kitchen saying, "You're not tough enough." Carol taunted me, "You child." Chief West said, "It could happen to you." My mother drank coffee from her red mug.

Jake was now a few feet behind me. I heard voices from his radio, but couldn't understand anything. Stumbling in the smoke, I reached the plateau. The fire was at our heels. Jake swore as he slipped. Without thinking, I turned and grasped his arm and dragged him up onto the rock. We both collapsed.

I dimly saw deployed fire shelters and a couple of bodies lying face down, gloved hands holding helmets over their heads. I lay against the rock and felt the unbearable heat of the fire. My lungs fought for the small quantity of oxygen that remained near the ground. I was certain I would die from inhaling superheated air. I smelled burnt hair. It was mine.

The firestorm reached the top of the ridge where it paused for a few seconds in the cross winds, then blew past us down the other side of the mountain. I heard hissing and popping, rocks exploding from the intense heat. Silence. *I had survived. We had survived.*

I sat up coughing and vomited the banana and my breakfast onto my shirt. We struggled to clear our lungs and to breathe. My chest hurt, my eyes burned. Everyone was blackened with ash. Hector was on his hands and knees, saliva dripped from his mouth, black snot and soot ran from his nose. Luis sat, legs

crossed, staring straight ahead. Blood ran down Red Eye's forehead. I wondered how he had reached the plateau. He was below Jake when the firestorm came. Art was the first to stand up.

I knew I had radiant heat burns on my ears, the back of my neck, and the exposed flesh on each wrist between my gloves and fire shirt. Next to me, Jake cursed and groaned, and I remembered he wasn't wearing a cotton undershirt. "Thanks Greg," he said. "I think my arms are burnt."

Dozer's radio lay on the rock. The lookout's voice from across the canyon, screamed for information. "What's happened? Is everyone out? Give me a headcount!" Dozer seized the radio.

"Where's TB?" I asked. He wasn't with us. "Where's TB?" I shrieked. The pain in my chest and on my skin disappeared and my mind emptied of everything but the image of TB as he disappeared into the flames. Tears streamed down my cheeks, but not from the smoke. *We had left TB to die in the brush.*

Dozer yelled into the radio, "We have entrapment. We've got a possible fatality and burns. Get a Medivac in here, send a Medivac!"

We regained our senses. A headcount confirmed only TB was missing. Shocked and physically drained, we stood on the plateau for a moment, heads down. We were stunned by what had happened. "We've got to go see about TB," Art said. "He's still down there."

"Let's go," I said.

"I'm coming with you," Luis said.

"Watch it," Hector said, "the ground is super hot."

"Not everyone needs to see this," Art said in a low voice, "I'll go alone."

Art didn't go alone. Everyone followed as we made our way back down what had been our pathetic fireline. Snags and spot fires still burned. The entire side of the canyon, which minutes earlier had been covered with thick growth, was charred. We approached the spot where we thought we had stopped work and looked for TB. Nothing. We edged further down and traversed the side of the mountain, fearful of what we would find.

We saw him. TB had no chance to deploy his fire shelter. His stiff body lay twenty feet below us. He lay on his stomach. He must have lost his footing and slid down the slope. His arms were stretched out as though he were still trying to climb up the steep incline. Charred edges of his yellow Nomex fire suit stuck out beneath what remained of his body. Below him, the melted remains of his helmet and goggles lay in the dirt. Along with the smell of the fire, there was something else, the odor of burnt flesh. I wanted to look

away, but could not. Tears dripped onto the vomit on the front of my shirt. Dozer came up behind me and put his hand on my shoulder. "There's nothing we can do now," he said, and uttered something in Spanish.

I heard a helicopter. Looking back up toward the ridge, I saw CDF paramedics hover jump onto the plateau with their equipment.