Fury of Fire

by Kristin Lewis

1 At 3:30 a.m. on a breezy fall morning in 2003, sixth-grader Kevin Conaway was jolted awake by his mom, Diane. "Get up," she said, her tense face barely visible in the darkness.

2 Immediately, Kevin noticed a powerful, choking smell wafting through the open window. And then he realized what it was: smoke.

3 What happened next is a blur. Kevin's mom handed him a flashlight—the power was out—and told him to wait in her room with his 4-year-old brother, Chris. Dazed, Kevin did as he was told. He had no idea what was going on out there in his town of Valley Center, California. Clearly, there was a fire. But where was it? And how close?

4 While Kevin waited with his brother, his parents went outside to see what was going on. On the main road at the end of their street, they came across an eerie sight: a parade of cars, all heading in the same direction, stretched as far as they could see. Some cars were packed with suitcases. Others were full of pets. A few people were leading horses. Everyone was fleeing.

5 Kevin's parents could hear the fire roaring like a train in the distance. The air was thick with smoke. Yet there were no alarms, no flashing lights, no firefighters with hoses. Kevin and his family were about to witness the deadliest series of wildfires in the history of California. And they were completely on their own.

Blistering Skin

6 Fire is key to human existence. We rely on it for warmth and to cook our food. It is also one of the most destructive forces in nature, one that sometimes rages out of control. Over the centuries, sweeping infernos have laid waste to some of the greatest cities in the world. London, San Francisco, Boston, and Chicago have all been ravaged by runaway fires.

7 Wildfires are particularly treacherous. These fires start in the wilderness, often fueled by dry vegetation and wind. Within minutes, a few embers left at a campsite can turn into a raging sea of flames. Wildfires can move at speeds up to 60 miles an hour, four times faster than the average person sprints. They burn as hot as 2,600 degrees Fahrenheit—hot enough to melt gold. The front end of a wildfire is an invisible wave of heat. Contact with this heat will blister skin, crumble eyelashes, and turn hair to ash in one second. After four seconds, clothing bursts into flame. And this is all before the actual flames arrive.

8 Wildfires occur on every continent, except Antarctica. In the summer of 2011, a series of wildfires ravaged Arizona, Texas, and New Mexico. In California, where Kevin lives, wildfires are so common in the fall that people call it "fire season." Every year, fire crews put out hundreds of fires long before they can spill into areas where people live.

9 The wildfire that woke Kevin and his family, however, was different. It was far more destructive than anything California had ever seen.

No Warning

10 In fall 2003, conditions in San Diego County were ideal for a catastrophic fire. A severe drought had killed large numbers of trees, turning them into giant matchsticks. It wouldn't take much to start a fire—a single ember from a forgotten campfire, a cigarette dropped by a careless hiker, a lightning strike.

11 On October 25, 2003, a man lost in Cleveland National Forest, east of San Diego, lit a fire at dusk, hoping to signal rescuers. The fire quickly ignited the surrounding vegetation. Within a few hours, waves of flame had scorched 5,000 acres of land, incinerating everyone and everything in their path. "Death and destruction came quickly," reporters would later write in the San Diego Union Tribune. "Witnesses said that those who died had little chance."

12 The flames were driven by strong winds called the Santa Anas, which blow across southwestern California and make wildfires very difficult to control. Because it was fire season, the major fire agencies were already prepared with extra crews and equipment.

13 But things were about to get far worse than they had anticipated. As fire crews mobilized at Cleveland National Forest, an arsonist started another fire 25 miles north. This fire, later named the Paradise Fire, was heading straight for Kevin's town. No warning system existed to alert Valley Center's 20,000 sleeping residents. And with crews to the south already tied up, few firefighters were available to rush to the scene.

In the Line of Fire

14 Kevin and his family had no idea that they were in the midst of an epic fire disaster—a series of blazing fires that would later be called the Fire Siege of 2003. Yet Kevin's parents' instincts told them to leave the area at once. They did not waste time worrying over which of their possessions to take with them. Kevin hastily gathered his guitar, his schoolbooks, and some clothes. He got the dogs and cats into crates, while his mom grabbed water and food and his dad packed their three skittish horses into the trailer.

15 As the family piled into the car, black plumes of smoke rose ominously into the sky. Ash rained down everywhere. Up on the hill behind them, bright flames were rushing toward their neighbor's house. They quickly drove up and down their street, honking the horn to wake anyone who might still be asleep—and all the while, the fire was getting closer and closer. Then they joined the line of cars inching away from the fire at an agonizingly slow five miles per hour.

16 Kevin distinctly remembers that he was not afraid. He did not understand the magnitude of what was happening. It didn't occur to him that his house might burn to the ground, that his family and friends were in serious danger. He had no way of knowing that the firestorm had already killed more than 10 people, or that entire neighborhoods had been wiped off the map.

17 Nor could Kevin know just how fortunate he was. Just miles away from his family's car, the firestorm created its own wind, swirling flames in a tornado-like spiral that burned across roads and highways where people were trying to escape.

18 Soon, 14 distinct fires were raging across southern California. Some people, trapped in their cars, were overtaken by the inferno. Some did not wake up in time and died in their homes. A few tried in vain to outrun the flames. In the town of Lakeview, one couple survived by jumping into their swimming pool. For others, it wasn't the flames that were deadly, but the toxic air. One breath could suffocate a person by searing airways and lungs.

The Long Wait

19 Kevin and his family found safety in a restaurant parking lot on the other side of town—free from the heavy smoke. They stayed there for hours, listless and shocked, trying to figure out where to go next. Kevin recalls trying to comfort his traumatized cats. "There was so much uncertainty," Kevin says. "It was surreal."

20 Eventually, they took refuge at a friend's house. Day after day, they waited. News reports became more grim. The destruction was too massive to comprehend. The death toll rose. The Conaways watched endless footage of burning houses, wondering if theirs was still standing. They worried about friends they couldn't reach.

21 In the end, it took more than 14,000 firefighters to extinguish the fires. By then, the blaze had scorched 750,000 acres of land, destroyed 3,710 homes, and killed at least 22 people.

Going Home

22 At last, on October 29, roads reopened, signaling it was safe to go home. When they finally pulled onto their street, Kevin saw the most comforting thing he'd seen since the ordeal began: his home, untouched against the blackened hillside. Firefighters had arrived in time. It was one of the greatest moments of his life. "That will always stay with me," Kevin says.

23 Even though their house had been spared, Kevin and his family were haunted by sorrow over all that had been lost in the fire. Valley Center was transformed from a lively town into a disaster zone. Entire neighborhoods were reduced to ash. Debris littered the streets. Kevin's middle school became a shelter for families who had lost their homes.

24 Eight years later, these memories still linger for Kevin. But so do the images of how he and his family banded together with their neighbors to help each other, to clean up their town, to distribute clothing and supplies. He recalls that the town created an alert system in the event of another disaster. He remembers that when more wildfires started in 2007, the system worked, and everyone was safely evacuated.

25 As for the scorched land? After all the devastation, after all the smoke and fire and fear, lives began to mend. Families in Valley Center started rebuilding their houses. Nature also began to recover. Seedlings sprouted from the ash. Within five months, vivid wildflowers were thriving on the charred hillsides.

26 Nature was healing itself.