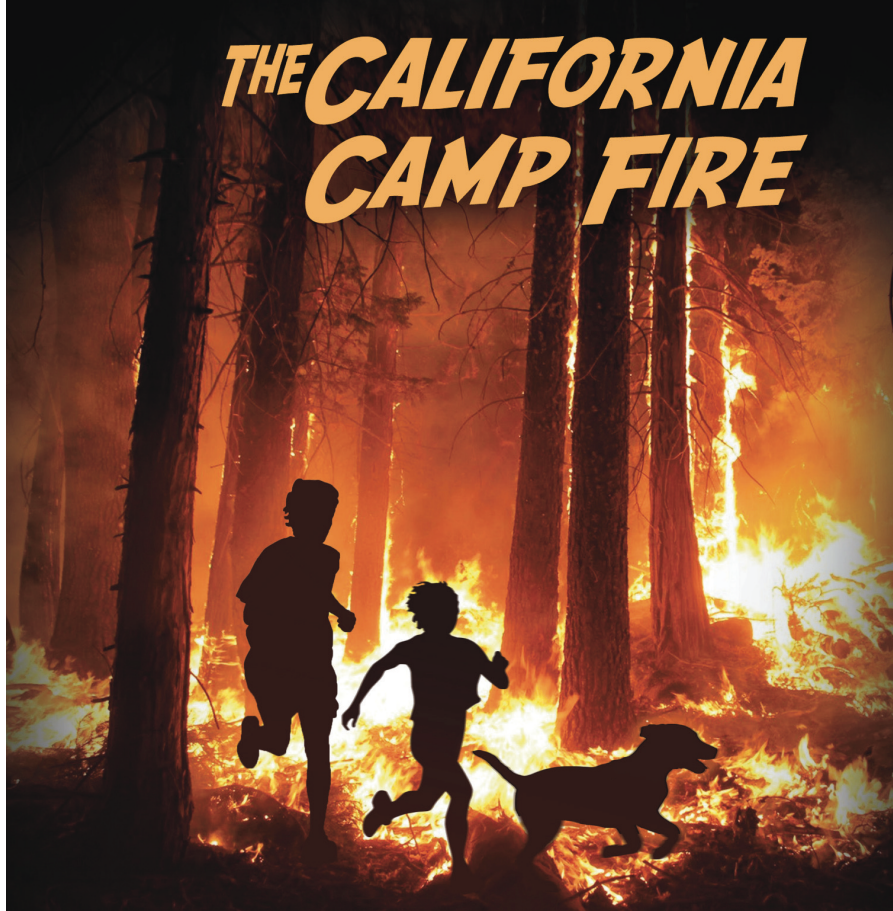


I ESCAPED

THE CALIFORNIA CAMP FIRE



CALIFORNIA'S DEADLIEST WILDFIRE

S.D. BROWN
SCOTT PETERS

PRAISE FOR S.D. BROWN

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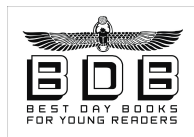
“My eight year old loved this book! Couldn't put it down! In fact, he chose to read this instead of his hour of screen time!”

— ANDREA

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I ESCAPED BOOK TWO

**S D BROWN
SCOTT PETERS**



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Best Day Books For Young Readers

PARADISE, CALIFORNIA

November 7, 2018

Fourteen-year-old Troy's hands gripped the steering wheel so hard his knuckles hurt.

The fire had jumped the road. Explosions and flames burst on both sides, chasing the Bronco from behind—a fire-breathing monster herding them toward the forest. A forest full of nature's fuel to feed the raging blaze.

He turned to his younger sister. Her face was half-covered by a wet rag to block the smoke from entering her lungs. Above the rag, her eyes bulged in terror.

She started to scream, waving her arms and pointing. "The fire's everywhere. Look! By the road. At that house. The roof just collapsed. And look at the bakery. Flames are coming out of the windows. Turn around. Go back."

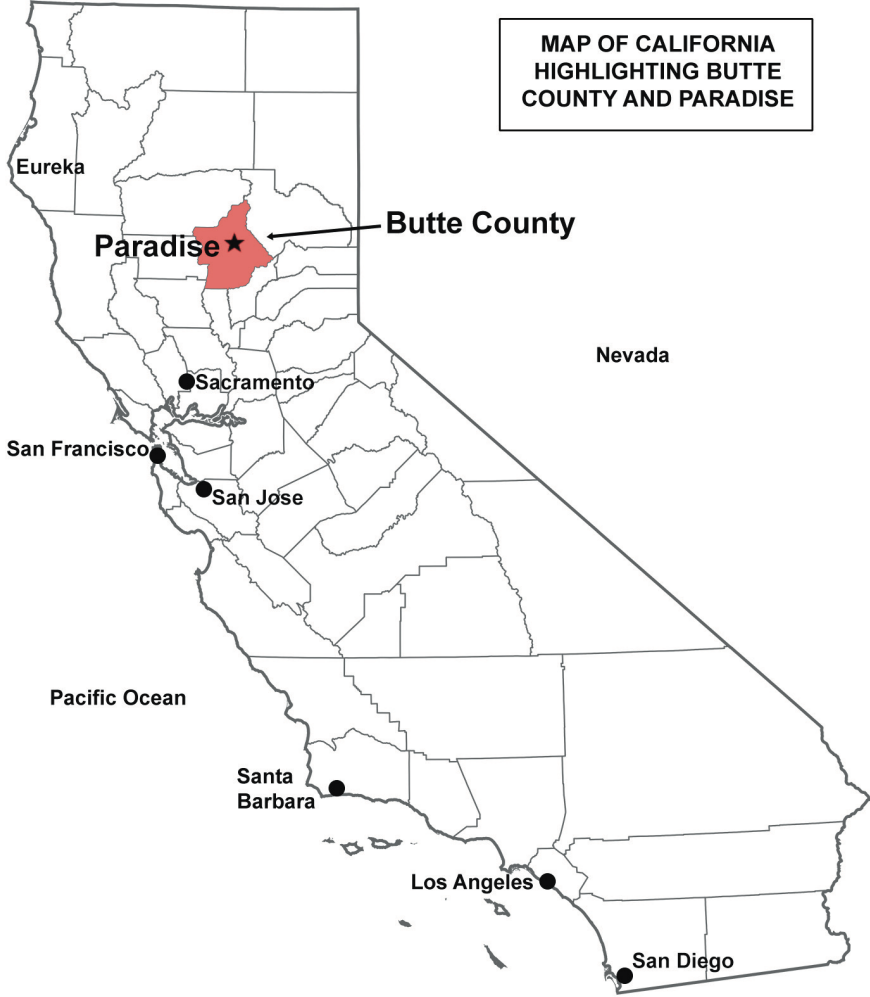
"We can't," he said, looking into the rearview mirror. It seemed as if the entire town behind them was lit with flames. "We have to keep going. It's our only chance."

"We're not going to make it," she said.

"Yes we are." He hoped the lie would morph into truth.

*The fire accelerated,
consuming the equivalent of
a football field every second,
— Cal Fire Official Statement*

MAP OF CALIFORNIA
HIGHLIGHTING BUTTE
COUNTY AND PARADISE



CHAPTER ONE

November 7, 2018 - 4:00 PM

Fourteen-year-old Troy Benson snagged the keys to the family's blue Ford Taurus from the kitchen counter. His dad had just finished drinking a glass of water and had set it in the sink. His mom scurried around like she'd be going away for a month instead of a day.

Were they ever going to leave?

Troy said, "Hey, I can load your stuff in the car and back it out of the garage for you. Okay?"

His dad grinned. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you're trying to get rid of us. Sooner than later."

Exactly, Troy thought. Once his parents left town, he'd walk to the HOLIDAY MARKET for some serious junk-food-contraband. Since his parents had opened PARADISE HEALTH MART, he'd been drowning in organic-this and hummus-that.

He finger-shot his dad. "Wish I had a get-out-of Paradise card like you and Mom. Admit it. Living in Paradise is kind of boring."

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Welcome to Paradise, California

"I'd be careful what you wish for, son," his dad said and winked. He looked at the clock on the wall. "Honey. If you still want to attend the no-host dinner, we need to get on the road."

"Almost there," Mom said. "Just one last thing."

Troy grabbed the two suitcases, lugged them into the garage and hit the remote. The garage door rumbled open like the thunder before a lightning storm. The car was parked next to his dad's SUV Bronco. The suitcases went into the car's trunk and he went into the driver's seat. Ever since he'd learned to drive the tractor on his grandparents' farm, his dad had let him pseudo-drive around the yard—mostly on the lawnmower.

At least he'd be king for twenty-four hours. His little sister would have to do what he said. Go to bed when he told her. Eat what he served. Watch what he wanted to watch on Netflix.

Using the rearview mirrors, he backed the car into the

I ESCAPED THE CALIFORNIA CAMP FIRE (PREVIEW)

front yard and onto the yellow front lawn to make a perfect three-point turn. He grinned. At least he hadn't had to cut the grass since June because it hadn't rained in seven months. Plus, the town had water-use restrictions, which meant no outside watering.

All the yards looked the same—dried stubble, bare dirt flowerbeds, and dead bushes. Even the weeds had given up their will to live.

Everyone said the hot, dry summers were normal, but usually they'd had plenty of rain by November. This year was different. Governor Brown had declared an official end to the five-year California drought the previous April, but Paradise hadn't gotten the memo.

The only good thing about the local water-famine was that his last yard-chore had been to pull the dead plants and toss them into the compost pile in the backyard.

Troy got out of the car. It was windy and cool. After all, it was November and almost winter. Rascal, the family's large German shepherd, ran over and nudged Troy's hand. The boy rubbed her between the ears. The dog's tail slapped his leg like a drummer in a rock band.

"You're the best thing about living here," he told the dog. "Who named this place Paradise? Must have been someone's idea of a joke. Look at it. Except for the tall evergreens on the hill and around town, everything is dried up and dead. My idea of Paradise is everything green with flowers and palm trees like Hawaii. Not like this H-E-double-hockey-sticks kind of place. Minus the inferno."

There was no point in complaining. He was stuck in Paradise—a small town in Northern California along the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range. Only

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27,000 people lived in the whole town, and twenty-five percent were old—as in senior citizen old and retired.

It was an over six-hour drive to get to San Francisco and civilization.

Instead of people, Paradise had trees. Instead of streets, there was one road in and one road out. Instead of high-rise buildings, there were trailer courts tucked between small planned and unplanned neighborhoods.

If his parents had to move to the country, why hadn't they moved to the Central Valley near his grandparents? Where there was a horse to ride and a tractor to drive?

Rascal barked. The dog bounded across the yard.



I ESCAPED THE CALIFORNIA CAMP FIRE (PREVIEW)

She grabbed a red ball from under the skeleton of an oak tree. A black tire hung from one of the lower branches.

A gust of wind knocked the swing, making it spin. The breeze sent a few dead leaves scattering across the lawn.

Rascal ran back to Troy, dropped the ball at her master's feet, and sat.

Troy picked up the ball and tossed it high into the air. It dropped and somehow miraculously landed inside the tire. Was it the wind?

"Wow!" Troy couldn't do it again, even if he tried a million times. "Go get it, girl."

Rascal raced after the ball. She jumped on the tire, sending the black rubber Goodyear into a twirl. Rascal barked and jumped again. The branch cracked. Held for two more twists of the tire before snapping and crashing to the dry earth.

Rascal yelped.

"Come on, girl," Troy said. "It's time to go inside and hope Mom doesn't notice."

CHAPTER TWO

4:15 PM

Troy smiled at his mom like he was listening. He wasn't. His mind was focused on his plans for the next twenty-four hours and the food he was going to eat. It was going to be stellar. Pizza. Hot dogs. Mac-N-Cheese. Chili fries. Fish sticks. Pepsi. Mountain Dew. Henry Weinhard's Root Beer. Double-stuffed Oreos. Cookie-dough ice cream. Doritos Nacho Cheese chips. And whatever else he wanted to eat. And not at the table.

"Troy, are you listening?" his mom said.

"Yeah, Mom."

"Then what did I just say?"

He held up his thumb to begin the countdown. "No friends over." Up went the index finger. "No junk food." His other fingers followed as he rattled off the rules. "Go to bed at the regular time. Get up a half hour early. Don't miss the bus." Next hand. "No fighting. No messes. Walk the dog. Feed the cat. If we have any problems, consult Mrs. Jones next door. She's a retired nurse and knows

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what to do in an emergency." He grinned and punched the air. "Nailed it."

"You did," his dad said. "But in case of a real emergency, call 911. Honey, we really need to get on the road."

"One last thing," Mom said.

"You said that twenty minutes ago," Dad said.

"Troy and Emma," his mom said, doing her version of Vanna White and sweeping her hand across the spotless kitchen, "this should look exactly as it does when we return." She pulled out her phone. "And so there's no argument, I'll document how things look."

She snapped shots of the big open kitchen and living area. *Click*. The sink. *Click. Click. Click*. Stove-top. Refrigerator. Microwave. *Click*. Floor. *Click. Click. Click. Click*. "Emma, use the microwave and not the stove. Remember the cookies you forgot in the oven last week? I don't want to come home to find you burned the house down. Troy, don't forget to lock up before you go to bed."

"Enough, honey," Dad said, giving Troy a wink. "If we didn't trust Troy and Emma to be responsible, we wouldn't be leaving them home alone for the night. What kind of trouble can they get into? They'll be in school all day tomorrow, and you know Mrs. Jones has an eagle-eye view from her front room window. Everything'll be fine. We'll be home tomorrow night."

"I know," Mom said. "It's just that my babies are growing up too fast."

"We're not babies," Emma chimed in. She shot Troy a look. "At least I'm not."

"That's because you're a mutant," Troy said, laughing. "A science experiment gone wrong." At his mother's frown, he added, "Just kidding. I love my little sister."

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Dad pointed at the wall clock hanging over the stove, with its butter-knife hour hand and spoon minute hand.

"One last hug." Mom scooped both kids into the same tight embrace. To Troy, she said, "Be nice to your sister." To Emma, "Your brother is in charge. Do what he says."

"Do I have to?" Emma pouted.

"Come on," Dad said. "We want to get there before nightfall."

Troy grinned. His dad liked to exaggerate. It was only an hour's drive to Redding and at least three hours until sunset.

Troy and Emma waved as their parents drove around the corner and disappeared from view. Rascal barked and Midnight appeared from under a bush. Emma scooped up the kitten and cradled it like a baby.

Troy slugged his sister in the arm and yelled, "Party time!"

"Shut up, Troy." Emma pointed to Mrs. Jones' living room window with a wave and a big smile. "She's watching."

The older woman waved back from her recliner.

"Looks like her window is open. Bet she heard you."

"Don't be such a brat," Troy said and went inside with Rascal at his heels.

CHAPTER THREE

November 8, 2018 - 2:00 a.m.

The clock on the kitchen wall read 2:00 a.m.

Troy grinned. If his parents asked, he could truthfully say they were up extra, extra early for the school day. He'd just leave out the part that they hadn't gone to bed, yet. No foul. No penalty.

Emma would be stupid to rat him out unless she wanted to be on restriction, too.

Empty soda cans, candy wrappers, and half-eaten junk food littered the coffee table in the living room. Rascal had just wolfed down pizza crusts and was starting in on licking the empty paper plates. Midnight sniffed the carpet where Emma had spilled chili.

On TV, Kung Fu Panda had just rolled down a set of steep temple steps.

"I don't feel so good," Emma said, her hand clutching her stomach. "Maybe we should have eaten the tofu and chicken Mom left for us to reheat for dinner. Instead of this junk food."

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"Not even," Troy said. "It's because we're watching this stupid movie."



He'd wanted to watch *Transformers*. At least the panda was better than Emma's favorite movie—*Mary Poppins* from the last century. "You didn't have to eat my food. You could have had the casserole."

"I'm going to tell Mom. You spent our emergency money on junk food."

"And I'll tell her you were in her makeup," Troy said, eyeing her clown lips. "Maybe you should go to bed. We can clean up in the morning before school." He grinned. "By then, Rascal and Midnight should take care of most of it."

"Okay," Emma said and picked up Midnight. "Aren't you going to bed?"

"In a little while," he said. As soon as she left the

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room, he shut off the lights, put on *Transformers* and turned it down low. He settled on the couch under one of his mom's crocheted blankets. Before long, sleep punched him into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER FOUR

9:15 a.m.

Troy awoke to dog breath, a canine tongue and a cold nose nudging his face. He patted Rascal's head. "Too much pizza, girl? Can't you wait till morning?"

Rascal whined, let out a few yips and pawed his arm.

"Okay." Troy sat up on the couch and rubbed his eyes, still half asleep. "You need to go do your business. Just a minute." He reached down and felt for his shoes.

Wait. Something was off. Suddenly he was wide-awake; his eyes darted left and right. He couldn't see anything. It was black. The usual electronic lights were dead and the steady hum of the fridge silent. The electricity must be out—which was seriously *weird*. There hadn't been a storm in months.

What time was it?

Rascal began to bark, jumping on Troy. Then the dog nipped at the sleeve of his hoody and pulled.

"Okay. Okay. I'm moving." Troy stood, fumbled for his cell on the coffee table, and turned on the flashlight

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feature. The beam lit the room. Their food-feast remains lay strewn across the carpet like garbage art. "Wow. Look at the mess you made. Good thing Mom's not here."

The landline rang. Rascal started barking and frantically ran back and forth to the door. Whoever was calling could wait. It was the middle of the night and probably a wrong number. Plus, Troy didn't want to clean up after Rascal if she had an accident in the house. Which hadn't happened since she was a puppy.

He stumbled after Rascal and opened the door. Outside, it was pitch black. There wasn't even starlight. The wind ripped at his clothes like it was being chased by fire-breathing dragons. And smelled that way, too—smoky and warm.

Someone must have built a bonfire.

"Hurry up, girl," he said. He wanted to get back inside and back to sleep.

Rascal didn't head to her usual spot. Instead, she kept barking and barking.

"What's wrong?" he asked. She usually only got this excited when a raccoon grocery shopped in their trashcan.

"Troy?" Emma's voice shouted. Her shadow darkened the front door.

"What?"

"That was a call from my school."

Emma must be dreaming. "That's ridiculous. Your school wouldn't call in the middle of the night."

"It's not night," she said, her voice all excited and squeaky. "It's nine fifteen. In the morning."

"What?" He looked at his phone. She was right. But then why was it still dark? Were they in the middle of a

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solar eclipse? Mrs. Grady, his science teacher, was slipping. He looked back at his phone.

Wow. He'd missed at least fifteen text messages from his friend Jeremy. He scrolled through and read them in order. By the time he reached the last one, he knew why Rascal was acting crazy. He felt a little crazy himself.

The first one read—*where r u?*

Second one—*cutting class?*

The third to twelfth were similar jabs. Number thirteen said—*fire drill*

Fourteen—*fire for real!*

Fifteen—*yeah school's out*

The last one said—*i see flames*

We hope you enjoyed this preview!
Find the book in stores June 23, 2019

