

Chapter One

When you're tempted to think of something as being bad luck, you might just be wrong.

On the morning of October 22, 2007 a one-hundred foot wall of flames hot enough to melt metal raced through the idyllic mountain community of Lake Arrowhead, California. Pine trees exploded in the fierce heat, firefighters bravely assaulted the flames, risking their lives to save the homes lying in the inferno's path. Despite their efforts, over 176 houses were reduced to ash and rubble. One of them was the dream house that Shirley, my wife of sixty years, and I had designed and built ourselves just ten years earlier.

We officially moved in during June of 1997, just Shirley, me and our three dogs, Sadie, Sydney, and Stimp. It was a beautiful mountain escape, with views of pine-covered mountains, desert peaks and Mt. San Gregorio at 11,499 feet tall, the highest mountain in Southern California. In 2003 my grown daughter Rochelle moved in with us and she brought a little Chihuahua with her. Shirley liked the dog so much, we bought another one. Over the next few years we added four cats, a blue-tick coon hound, a pit bull, you name it, our house was practically a kennel. It was 2400 square feet with four bedrooms, three baths, cool in the summer and warm in the winter thanks to our wood-burning stove in the living room. We had a deck on the main floor where we could take in the views, enjoy the breeze and feed the birds. We put in a second deck down below and a two-car garage. It was a very, very comfortable house and we loved it. And then

one morning as the wind screamed, blew an Edison pole down and started a fire... the Sheriff ordered us to evacuate or possibly lose our lives, and everything changed.

I will never forget the day, after the fires had been contained, that we returned to see what was left of our home. Coming up the mountain was fine, but when we got to where we could actually see where the fire had been, everything had been so completely devastated it looked like a small atomic bomb had gone off. Everything was just flattened, the ground barren and gray and scorched. It wasn't a matter of there'd been a fire and a few minor structures had held on, or perhaps the corner of a house was still there—everything was completely leveled. Black sticks protruded from the ashen soil, trunks of trees that had been charred. Incredibly, every so often a house right in the middle of the devastation was still standing, completely untouched by the flames.

As we pulled up to what had been our home just several days earlier, the driveway is all that was left. It was as if our home had never even existed. The wind, I was told later, had accelerated coming up the hill to over one hundred miles per hour. The wind was so fierce and it made the fire so hot that it melted things that you wouldn't thought possible. The burned skeletons of cars sat in the road, their alloy wheels just melted off. We got out of the car and slowly walked down our driveway to assess the damage. We came up the driveway and looked down below where all the debris was and some of our appliances were so twisted that you couldn't tell what they originally had been. I couldn't even identify my snow blower down in the debris. The raging flames were so hot that they actually popped concrete out of the driveway—the fire destroyed concrete.

At that moment, seeing that literally nothing was left of the house we'd worked all of our lives for, it was impossible to envision what would happen next. What I didn't realize is that what seemed like a terrible disaster would turn out to be one of the most fortunate things that ever happened to me.