[Snap Judgment intro]

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Okay, so you might not get it first, but this is about the forces of nature, but stick with me. Stick with me. Back in the day, I'm living in Japan, I have this job. It starts around 6:00 PM every Thursday, practicing English with a group of 10 beautiful young women, each more awesome than the next. And what we really do is just gossip about whoever is not in the room. Sometimes, we gossip in English, mostly nobody bothers. And then, the real fun begins. I call my buddy, Darren, on the company credit card, these beautiful ladies take us out to various bars and restaurants where we eat and laugh and drink and dance and play all night long. And as a job, the very best job ever, for which I am paid money, and it's fantastic, truly. So, what do I do? What do I do? I get wind of a film project.

[intriguing music]

Director says I'd be perfect for the starring role in his new gangster movie. Of course, why wouldn't an American black man be perfect for the role in a Japanese gangster film? He tells me I just got to move down to southern Japan for a few months for something called preproduction. Oh, yeah? Preproduction. All right. Okay. Hollywood lingo, preproduction. No problem. I quit my job, the gossip and the drinks, and the dancing. And I go down to follow the dream I didn't know I had, of a being in a gangster Yakuza flick. What I don't understand it first is that this movie is not just about gangsters. It's financed by gangsters. By finance, I mean the gangsters, they say they're going to pay us, but they don't pay us. And finally, finally, after sleeping on the floor of a cramped apartment with nine other suckers, living on ramen noodles for several weeks, I bail.

I go back to Kyoto, to beg for my old job with the gossip, the dancing, the paychecks, but in my absence, a new guy, he filled my role. He's kind of a hippie, long hair, beads, big smile. He's handsome. Super nice. And I tell him, “I've returned from my job.” He laughs in my face. “Your job, man? This is my job. I pray to the Goddess for this. Mother Nature has blessed me. This is the best job ever.”

[upbeat music]

I can't argue with him. So, I leave. No movie, no job, no prospects. Certain I've broken a fundamental law of the universe, because his Mother Nature, she blessed me too, she told me not to follow a bunch of shady characters, often to who knows what, but I ignored her. We like to think, I like to think that those whispers from the natural world around us only apply when we're standing in a river or climbing a mountain. But maybe she's got something to say no matter where we are. And that's why today on Snap Judgment, as a public service, we proudly present Mother Nature.

[upbeat music]

My name is Glynn Washington. Please, please don't send me any resumes because that job I mentioned earlier? [exhales] That's no longer available. Well, you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

We begin in Sinaloa, Mexico. On the edge of the Pacific Ocean, there's a small fishing town without a single traffic light, and hardly any paved streets. Reporter Esther Honig takes us to an empty beach shrouded in fog. Snap Judgment.

[somber music]

[waves crashing]

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Nancy:** In jeans and flip flops, Belen Delgado points to an area on the horizon, where he found something that would change his life and the lives of everyone he knew.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] Well, the truth is, it was one of the best chapters of my life. For my family, for my town.

**Nancy:** It was one evening 15 years ago, Belen sat with a good friend in front of his home. And they chatted about the catch that day.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] We sent people out to fishing, they wouldn't bring back anything. In fact, many would say, “What's going on?” And it's like, “Well, who knows? There aren't any fish.”

**Nancy:** There was a time when the red snapper and sea bass were over five feet long. And the schools of fish were so massive, there'd be so many hundreds of them splashing and jumping around, it looked like the ocean was boiling. But the truth was, the catch had been lousy for a long time now.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] It's really sad when a species that the fishermen rely on disappears. It's a punch in the gut to those who make most of their money from fishing. They're always the most affected.

**Nancy:** That night, as Belen sat on the porch, he told his friend something he'd recently heard from another fisherman. This fisherman worked on a large shrimping boat, and he did what he always does. He dropped the nets and drag them across the ocean floor. But when he pulled them up, he noticed something strange caught in the webbing.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] One and then another callo de hacha fell out.

**Nancy:** Two shiny black shellfish called callo de hacha.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] El callo de is one of the species that-- let's put it this way, it is one of the most expensive things you can catch.

**Nancy:** It's named for its large black shell in the shape of an X, “Hacha” means hatch it in Spanish. Part of the shell’s open and inside is a large white scallop that's considered a delicacy.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] We were surprised by the size of this type of callo. No one had ever found this shellfish in this area, but they were enormous, huge and they live in shallow and deep waters.

**Nancy:** A few weeks later, when the shrimping boat caught another callo de hacha, they brought it to Belen. Now, he was convinced this wasn't just a coincidence. There must be mountains of callo de hacha down there. And he got the feeling this could be big money.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] There was a risk I could be wrong. Many fishermen told me that it wasn't true, that I was just making it up, and that bothered me. But I felt like, “Yes, there is callo de hacha.” For me, it did exist because it's very hard to catch callo de hacha with a net.

**Nancy:** He knew the first thing he had to do was figure out just how much callo de hacha there was, and that was no small task. He'd have to reach the ocean floor, some 70 feet below the surface.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] So, we started looking for a diver.

**Nancy:** But no one in town knew how to dive this deep. Belen called around until he found a guy all the way out in Baja, California.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] There are people there who are experienced in this. They dive and fish for mollusks and callo de hacha.

**Nancy:** The man was in his mid-40s. He'd been diving all his life and he seemed up to the task.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] We asked him, “How much will you charge us to do this job?” And he said, “How about we make a deal? If there's callo, I won't charge you for the trip, but you'll give me a chance to fish some of it. If there's nothing, you'll pay for my trip there and back." So, he came.

**Nancy:** But Belen also wanted to keep this a secret.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] “Let's be discreet so that this doesn't turn into complete chaos. Everything must be done carefully. You know what? If there are callo, don't tell anyone.”

**Nancy:** If there was as much callo de as Belen thought, he knew he had to keep it under control.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] The way fishermen think is, “I'm just going to fish because there will come a day when I can't fish anymore.”

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] My brother-in-law got on the boat and then the diver got on and he set up his air compressor.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] It's a machine that uses gasoline, it pumps.

**Nancy:** This guy didn't have a tank of oxygen or wetsuit. He built his own equipment. An old air compressor that sputtered like a lawnmower and pumped oxygen through a plastic hose into a diving mask. In blue jeans and white rubber boots, he dove off the side of the boat with a large mesh sack. The other men waited. An hour passed.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] And when the diver came up, the surprise. He had 100 pounds of callo.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] I said to him, “What did it look like down there?”

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] “You all are sitting on a mine of gold,” he says.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] “Wherever you step, there's callo.”

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

[ominous music]

**Nancy:** The man had stumbled upon a massive colony of shellfish, just off the town shore that covered a stretch of the ocean floor 30 miles long and a mile wide. It was worth millions of dollars. In the evening, the men met up in secret at the home of Belen’s brother-in-law where they hid their catch inside two large coolers.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] They were these enormous callos and I grabbed one and I ate it. I ate another one. That’s why I have cholesterol.

**Belen:** [laughs]

**Nancy:** The large coins of tender white meat tasted slightly salty and sweet. And they were so fresh, they practically melted in his mouth.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] They were the finest callo de hacha that you could find.

**Nancy:** Now, Belen needed some way to protect the callo and he knew he couldn't do it on his own. So, the next day, he got in his green pickup truck and drove to the federal fishing authorities two hours away in Mazatlán. He walked into the large office building carrying the cooler filled with his deep-sea treasure and asked to speak to a director.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] I said, “This is a callo de hacha that’s in Teacapán.” And he was shocked. And that's from just one boat. I said, “We haven't said anything. No one besides us knows. That's why we came here to see you. What do we want? That this doesn’t get out of control.”

**Nancy:** He needed the authority to step in to issue permits for local fishermen only, and to impose quotas, limiting how much each person could catch in a day. And he knew it could work. Not just because he was a fisherman. He was also a biologist.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] Well, I didn't just know how to catch them and sell them. No.

**Nancy:** As one of nine siblings, Belen was the first in his family to go to college, to study fish biology.

**Leonel:** [translating] That's when I became interested in studying something to protect where we live, to take care of it and to teach the fishermen to protect this resource.

**Nancy:** At the meeting, authorities assured Belen they'd look into it. And he walked away thinking he'd gotten the ball rolling on a plan. Now, he just had to keep this under wraps for a little longer. The problem was he'd already agree to let the diver from Baja fish callo. So, the next day, Belen’s brother-in-law and the diver spent all morning pulling up callo.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] A fisherman paddled over, and he found them fishing and he saw all the callo they had.

**Nancy:** Turns out a bunch of people on shore had seen them. And now they watched as the diver jumped off the side of the lone fiberglass boat and came back up with bag after bag of shellfish.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] And this fisherman, he liked to talk. So, he went back to Teacapán and told everyone what he saw.

**Nancy:** By the time the diver’s boat made it back to shore, all the fishermen in town were there waiting to see it for themselves.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] I said, “That's it. The bomb's gone off. What are we going to do?”

[intriguing music]

**Glynn:** When we return, it's callo de hacha season. And everyone in Teacapán wants a piece of the action. Stay tuned.

[intriguing music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, the Mother Nature episode. In the seaside town of Teacapán, where fisherman, Belen Delgado, he has just discovered millions of dollars’ worth of expensive shellfish called callo de hacha. In a small town like this, secrets don't stay secret for long. Snap Judgment.

**Nancy:** By the time the diver’s boat made it back to shore, all the fishermen in town where there waiting to see it for themselves.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] I said, “That’s it. The bomb’s gone off. What are we going to do?”

**Nancy:** Almost immediately, everyone in town, some of whom had never fished in their lives, teachers, politicians, ranchers, bought boats and hired divers. And men who didn't know how to dive were signing up for the job. There was money to be made, and everyone wanted in.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] There was a doctor, a good friend of the fishermen. He bought three boats. He didn't even need the money. It made me so mad, so angry to see this type of person take advantage and [unintelligible 00:17:53].

**Nancy:** Before the fishing authorities could do anything, more and more boats were out on the water, collecting hundreds of pounds of shellfish each day. And almost overnight, the town came back to life. People who were used to earning $10 a day were now earning $100 or more selling their catch on the black market to vendors for fancy restaurants up and down the Pacific Coast.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] Let's just say there was a lot of money. People bought cars and as much beer as they wanted.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] They had big weddings and parties. If they saw you walking by, they just offer you a plate of callo de hacha, which is something we never ate. And now, we can eat all we wanted.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] We felt proud. We felt really important because during this time, the economy of the Teacapán, I tell you, grew by 1000%.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Nancy:** Belen started fishing too. And since the authorities still hadn't stepped in, he decided to set a quota for himself.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] I had four boats I sent in too. I didn't want to send in more boats because I didn't want to over fish the areas. I was doing it on my own to say we can regulate ourselves. We don't have to destroy ourselves or destroy this resource. I wanted to set an example.

**Nancy:** Out of all the boats in town, just three sat unused lying on the beach, and two of them were Belen's.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] Everyone's like, "Send them all out, send them all out," and I was like, “No, wait.” A lot of people probably thought, “You're so stupid. What are you doing? There's money to be made.”

**Nancy:** Two months have passed since the discovery of callo de hacha, when researchers who'd studied the size of the colony came to present their findings. Some 300 fishermen in their white rubber boots and baseball caps gathered at the town's boardwalk to hear them talk.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] The researchers said that the colony of callo, if taken care of, had the potential to last us 10 years. 10 years.

**Nancy:** But Belen knew that at the rate they were going, it wasn't going to last half that. He decided to stand up and speak.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] “Gentlemen, we have to take care of the shellfish. We have to limit how much we catch. What do we gain by fishing 200 pounds each if they're not going to give us a good price? Let's only fish 100 pounds per boat so they pay us a higher price and the callo will last longer.”

**Nancy:** He knew other places in Mexico use self-impose quotas to protect their fish populations.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] A lot of them said, “No. Why use quotas? If we can fish 200 pounds, why would we fish less?” Many laughed. I said, “We're going to wipe them out.”

**Nancy:** It was hard enough dealing with the local fishermen and then outsiders started pouring in from hours away.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] People from other cities, from Chametla to Mazatlán, they started to come with their boats. It was mayhem, TV reporters came, and they looked for us and asked, what, where, and how, is it true?

[Reporter in Spanish language]

**Nancy:** The headlines called it “White Gold Fever,” or, “The Cocaine of the Sea." The story of the tiny town with an unbelievable fortune spread across the country.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] The entire world was talking about Teacapán. Teacapán, a vibrant town, a blessed town.

**Nancy:** The number of boats doubled and then tripled. Soon, there were close to 300. The locals tried to chase them off and fistfights broke out. That's when the pirates started.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] The fishermen would come. They were pirate fishermen. They would come and fish in the middle of the night.

**Nancy:** The pirates launched their boats from miles away so no one could see them entering Teacapán’s beach. Then, they'd speed off into the dark with their catch.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] At that moment, I called the fishermen to a meeting to look for a way to keep more outsiders from coming in. And you know what a few of them told me? “There's enough for everyone. They can come.” That's what they said.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] I was so mad with my own people. They just didn't want to understand.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] We were able to keep the prices steady. But those fishermen from the outside sold it cheap and kept undercutting our prices.

**Nancy:** With prices so low, now everyone had to fish even more callo just to earn the same amount of money as before, and the scuba divers had to dive much deeper.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] Because there was no more value in the shallow water, the further down they went, the more callo they found. And that's when we had our first tragedy. A diver went so deep that he got the bends.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Nancy:** To save the scuba diver, the closest hyperbaric chamber was two hours away, and the town had no ambulance. Belen grabbed the keys to his truck.

**Leonel:** [translating] Get in. I drove him to Escuinapa. I called the head, the ambulances are waiting for him. I helped him. He managed to make it.

**Nancy:** But other divers were not so lucky. Many died from the bends. In one case, the hose attached to a homemade air compressor burst while a man was underwater.

**Leonel:** [translating] There wasn't any movement on his line and when they pulled him up, he was already dead. They brought back his body in the boat. And honestly, it was a scary thing to see. Now, there was an even bigger fear that more divers could die.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] Seven divers wound up dying for us because we hired them. The moment came when-- how do you say, I almost threw in the towel.

**Nancy:** Nothing could stop the white gold fever, not the authorities, not the promise of more money or even death.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] Actually, I would go to sleep and wake up thinking about this. I was filled with anxiety. I was really worried about my workers.

**Nancy:** He was thinking about the men he hired to take out his boats and fish. They were missing out on making money from the callo.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] Am I wrong for not letting them work?

**Nancy:** One morning after sending out just two of his boats, Belen stood on the beach and looked at the hundreds of other boats out on the water, all fishing callo. He walked over to the two boats he'd kept back. They'd been lying belly up in the sun this whole time. And he thought about what to do.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] This is not going to have a happy ending. There's not going to be any more callo. Well, [chuckles] whatever let's finish this because the last guy in the water is going to miss out. I hired some divers, I got my workers, and I sent out my last two boats. Let's go. Everyone in the water. I felt that I failed. But when they went out to fish and they brought a good amount of callo de hacha, I think I felt better. This had to happen. My workers were happy, their families were happy. I guess I also have to be happy.

**Nancy:** By now the price for callo had sunk even lower but with all four of his boats working, there was still money to be made.

**Leonel:** [translating] Five tons. No, no, excuse me, seven tons. Imagine seven tons of callo de hacha multiplied by 200 boats. It was a world.

That my daughter turned 15. So, I said, “Come on. Let's get those callo. We're going to give my daughter a quinceañera.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] Actually, we threw the party here in the backyard. We opened the back gate and welcomed anyone who wanted to come. Everybody came. The place was super full.

**Nancy:** There were like 400 guests. Tables crammed around the dance floor. And each one was a centerpiece made out of callo de hacha shells. It was Belen’s idea. A plastic swan head with shells glued to either side like wings.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] In fact, it was one of the last good moments.

**Nancy:** That night, Belen danced and partied until the sun rose the next day.

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] I felt guilty about what happened. I wanted to forget everything and go back to the way things were. I would forget for a day and then the next, it would all come back. It was so frustrating that no one had understood. It was just so foolish.

[pensive music]

**Glynn:** The town of callo de hacha in Teacapán was fished out in less than a year and a half. The fishmen had toss so many callo shells and guts over the side of the boat that had poisoned the water, killing off whatever callo were left. Fishing in Teacapán is nearly nonexistent now. And Belen is retired but he still takes his boat out to where the colony of callo de hacha used to be.

[boat starts]

[Spanish language]

**Nancy:** Do you think that there could be callo in this area after 15 years?

**Belen:** [Spanish language]

**Leonel:** [translating] I think there must be callo now. Let's assume they are big, but there must be some. There must be.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Thank you, Belen, and everyone in Teacapán for sharing the story with us. This story was produced in collaboration with Fern: The Food & Environment Reporting Network, a nonprofit investigative journalism outlet. Big thanks to Brett Cunningham and Sam Fromartz at Fern. And Fern has a new podcast. It's called Hot Farm. Over four episodes, host Eve Abrams talks to farmers across the Midwest, about the reality of climate change and what they are doing or could be doing to fight it. You can find hot farm wherever you get your podcast. Voice acting for this piece was done by Leonel Garza. The original score for the story was by Renzo Gorrio. It was edited by Nancy López with production support from John Fecile. The story was produced and reported by Esther Honig.

[upbeat music]

When Snap Judgment returns, fire. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, the Mother Nature episode. My name is Glynn Washington. And today, we're introducing you to a podcast with suspense, with drama, with tearful reunion two heroes, and it's all true. It's called Escape from Mammoth Pool, that tells the story of a death-defying rescue. hundreds of campers within a raging fire in California. It also plays one weekend, September 2020, at a sparkling mountain lake called Mammoth Pool Reservoir. The best part, it’s got a happy ending. 242 people and 16 dogs made it out alive. That is not a spoiler because the best part of the story is how they did it. Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

**Karla:** When you're in a situation where you think your life is going to end, everything's going to just slow down completely.

**Kerry:** We'd like to think of time as a constant, as steady, unfluctuating, infallible. But in some situations, like if you think you're about to die, time can bend and flex.

**Alex:** It forever, but it was about 25 minutes.

**Kerry:** It can even seem to stop.

**Raul:** It felt like [chuckles] forever.

**Alex:** It felt like an eternity.

**Vicki:** It just felt like eternity.

**Kerry:** I'm Kerry Klein and this is Escape from Mammoth Pool by KVPR, the true story of how hundreds of campers at an isolated reservoir survived one of the fastest moving wildfires in California's recorded history.

[burning fire]

In last week's episode, we left our three families around lunchtime on September 5th, 2020. It was the Saturday of Labor Day weekend, and it was also the day the creek fire would catch everyone by surprise. At 10:00 AM that morning, it was just a blip on the radar, around 600 acres in size. But by dinnertime, it exploded to 45,000 acres. It devoured the 10 miles to Mammoth Pool in less than 24 hours. In briefings and interviews, fire officials would later call the blaze aggressive, unprecedented, and in a class by itself. With the fire closing in on the lake, these three families were navigating the throng of panic and chaos, as they got ready to evacuate the campground. In this episode, the 10 minutes that took an eternity.

[pensive music]

When we last saw Karla Carcamo, she and her family had been watching flames tumbled down the hillside. They were stalling, packing their trucks while counting the seconds until her siblings and cousins would return from a hike. They wondered how long they could wait. But as Karla made her way to her brother's tent to pack up his things, the decision was made for them.

**Karla:** All I heard was like a snap.

**Kerry:** It was a tree coming down.

**Karla:** And then like a [sssshhh], and it just hit the flooring. I ran. I have no idea how I ran that fast.

**Kerry:** It was a crystallizing moment because as much as Karla ached for her brother and sister, other people had been accounted for. Karla’s parents, young cousins, a disabled aunt. For their sakes, it was time to go.

**Karla:** We had to leave them, because it was either you stay and you burn up, or you go and you leave them.

**Kerry:** They had heard that the road out of the mountains was blocked. And so, the only way to go was further into the Sierra toward the lake to narrow, winding miles of dirt road that dead end at the water. Karla white-knuckled the drive with their mother and aunt in her Chevy Silverado.

**Karla:** I don't remember if I was crying, just because I wanted to not do that for my mom. But in my head, I just kept saying, “The Lord is our shepherd.” [sobbing] I couldn't remember the whole prayer. All I kept saying is, “The Lord is our shepherd. He will protect us. Nothing's going to happen to us. God is great. God is with us.” And I was just trying to control my emotions.

[pensive music]

**Kerry:** Across the campground, Alex Tettamanti was panicking. After she and her husband, Raul Reyes made it back to their campsite to pack. She kept calm by helping buddies, a couple with a nine-month-old baby, a friend having trouble leaving his brand-new DJ equipment behind. But once she and Raul were alone in their truck, Alex was floored.

**Raul:** She was having a moment, I guess.

**Alex:** Panic [crosstalk] straight. Once we're in the car and we're going, I just let it all go. I started screaming, crying. I just let it all go.

**Kerry:** She and Raul had seen the flames over the road out of the mountains. So, like Karla who had likely left earlier, they knew the only way out was toward the lake, a dirt road made more dangerous by the thick smoke. Under normal circumstances, the drive took about 10 minutes, but just after they took off, traffic came to a dead stop. Raul who was driving says they could have been there 30 seconds or 2 or 10.

**Raul:** When you're in a situation where you think your life is going to end, everything's going to just slow down completely.

**Kerry:** But he didn't want Alex to know he was worried.

**Raul:** And I was just trying to calm her down like, “It's going to be okay. As a matter of fact, I'm going to need you right now.”

[upbeat music]

**Kerry:** He gave Alex a task, call 911. It was one of the few calls that would make it through to the Madera County Sheriff's Office.

**Alex:** Once I had that task to do, I knew that like that was my job. That was my focus.

**Kerry:** When the call connected, she was calm.

**Alex:** [911 call] We're trying to leave the area. We're trapped. We are literally-- we have people running to the lake, like on foot running to the lake as fast as they can because there's fire everywhere.

**Kerry:** She laid out the situation.

**Alex:** It's just a lot of kids.

**911 Operator:** How many?

**Alex:** Families-- we have over 30 families here.

**911 Operator:** Do you see flames from where you are right now?

**Alex:** In every direction, yes.

**Kerry:** The dispatcher told Alex what they already knew, that the only safety would be at the water. But she stayed on the line, letting Alex talk and reminding her to breathe. Traffic began moving again. And as they wound their way through smoke and embers, Alex found another focus. She and Raul began to pick up passengers in their Dodge truck, hikers who were bursting out of trails or running along the road.

**Raul:** Hop on, hop on.

**Alex:** Hop on if you need to. Hop on.

**Kerry:** Alex crawled onto the front center console, and they crammed into the cab, piled into the truck bed and hung on to the open doors. All this, as flames closed in. At one point, the truck even crawled over part of a tree that had fallen across the road.

**911 Operator:** How many people do you have in your car?

**Alex:** 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, I don't even know how many people are in the back of the truck.

**911 Operator:** Yeah, just get as many people as you can.

**Alex:** I'm sure this is against the law. [chuckles]

**Kerry:** Against the law? Alex even cracked a joke. But she got tense again. She could feel the heat from the flames inside the truck. And suddenly, after eight minutes, the call dropped out.

**Alex:** Oh, God. [bleep] -this whole thing is on fire.

**911 Operator:** Alex?

[call ends]

**Kerry:** Meanwhile, Vicki Castro and her husband, Rolando Rosales, were also on the road. They, their two kids, and their niece and nephew were a few minutes ahead of Alex and Raul. But on their way to the lake, a car ahead of them suddenly just stopped. Its trailer had fallen off. Traffic was at a standstill and the flames were moving in.

[suspenseful music]

**Vicki:** It was basically you can turn left or right. When we turn right, the fire was about 10 feet to the left of us.

**Kerry:** A family and another car ahead of them panicked. Vicki and Rolando saw them jump out and start running for the lake. With the fire on their tail, Vicki made a plan.

**Vicki:** When I saw the fire, four cars behind us, I told the kids, “Get ready to run.”

**Kerry:** They'd run as a family, but when she opened the doors, her nephew panicked and just took off down the road. The other three kids bolted after him. Vicki was wrestling to see if their terrified dog, a husky puppy named Loki.

**Vicki:** That's what took the longest to try to get the dog out, and that's when I lost them like in two minutes.

**Kerry:** By the time Vicki started running into the smoke with Loki in her arms, she couldn't see her kids anywhere. Rolando was still in the driver's seat, trying to maneuver their truck and trailer around the abandoned car. But there were too many obstacles for such a large vehicle. A steep slope on one side trees and boulders on the other. He had to leave it all behind. Now the whole family was running toward the lake but separately. Vicki had no idea how far the water was. And she hadn't seen any cars make it past the gridlock.

**Vicki:** I had given up. Just at that point, I was just standing there and I'm like I can't go to the front of me because it was basically smoke and fire. You could see the flames reaching out to the road.

**Kerry:** But some vehicles did make it through, and out of the haze, a truck materialized. It was their friends, Raul and Alex. And Rolando was there in the truck bed. They were reunited. But only the two of them.

**Vicki:** I started panicking more as I still hadn't found the kids. And I was like, if I'm in a truck and I pass them, we're not going to have time to stop and pick them up.

**Kerry:** Alex ordered Vicki to get in. So, she did, handed Loki to Rolando, and hung off of one of the open doors, buffeted by heat and smoke. She shouted for the kids all the way to the lake. In the back, Rolando lost his grip on Loki.

**Vicki:** Someone pulled our dog away from my husband, like yanked him out of his arms and said basically, like, “F your dog,” and let his leash go. And our dog still tried to run behind the truck for like, two minutes, but he couldn't, he got scared. And that's the last time we saw the dog.

**Kerry:** By around 3:00 PM, after harrowing drives, all these families made it to the lake, where scores of people were already congregating. Mercifully, the water levels were low, which left a wide swath of dry lakebed below the tree line for Karla and everyone else to park.

**Alex:** I have never been so happy to see that there's not enough water in there for it to be at full capacity. The water wasn't up high. It looked like a little beach area.

**Kerry:** Once they emerged from the smoldering forest, cars eased down the boat launch onto the sand and inched as close to the water as they could. When Alex and Raul left their campsite, it was only the two of them and their dog in the truck. But when they reached the lake, around 17 people climbed out, reuniting with the friends and family who'd been waiting for them. Vicki and Rolando got out as fast as they could.

**Vicki:** We didn't ask her to stop. Me and Rolando just jumped out of the truck and we're like, “Okay, now we need to look for the kids.”

**Kerry:** It was Rolando who spotted them first.

**Rolando:** I can't explain what I felt at that moment.

**Vicki:** Everybody was crying.

**Rolando:** That was the happiest moment in my life, to be honest.

**Kerry:** They find out later the four kids had caught rides with family friends. At the lake, they'd kept their eyes glued on the boat launch, hoping the next car to arrive would be carrying Vicki and Rolando.

[pensive music]

**Kerry:** Everyone at the lake had escaped a campground going up in flames, and many began to feel glimmers of hope, even as the conditions worsened. The smoke choked out the sun turning late afternoon to nighttime, from the inside of a truck air conditioning blasting. Alex watched the fire make its final push toward the lake.

**Alex:** It was kind of light when we had first gotten there and we were finding where to park and then all of a sudden, the sky went black. That's when it really felt like the true fire was coming through. You can feel and hear the wind whipping across the vehicle. You could hear and see the embers flying everywhere, hitting trucks and trailers and stuff like that, that were all parked at the lake and just exploding.

**Kerry:** But she felt safe in her truck away from the tree line. She began to wonder how long they'd be here and if they had enough food. Meanwhile, Karla couldn't sit still. She paced from car to car checking in on relatives, keeping herself busy. If she stopped to think, she'd remember the hikers, including her brother and sister still hadn't emerged from the flames.

**Karla:** Time passed by, I don't know, I want to say like an hour, an hour and a half, two hours. And every time more time passed by, it was like I'd lost more hope. I lost more hope of them coming.

**Kerry:** But where Karla was losing steam, Vicki was gaining it. The six members of her family and dozens of others had taken refuge in the water. They'd waded in up to their waists, and she was shielding the kids from flying embers with a foam pad that she'd caught in the wind. The kids were in tears, crying that they were going to die. But Vicki, despite the rumbling flames, their missing dog, and the terror in her children's eyes, she had faith that somewhere beyond the fire, there were people who cared, people who were doing everything they could to get them out.

**Vicki:** And at that point, I was like, “You know what? We're not done. That's not the way that all of us end up.”

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Now, if you want to know, Snappers, Karla’s brother, sister, and cousins are eventually found, and they did make it out alive. So does Vicki and Rolando’s dog, Loki. But if you want to learn how, you can listen to the rest of Escape from Mammoth Pool. It's produced by Kerry Klein of KVPR in Fresno, California. More information on their website, *kvpr.org*, where you can find it on your favorite podcast app.

[upbeat music]

No, no, no, no, no, no, no, it's not the end of the show. It's the beginning of the journey, because if you need more story in your world and if you want to put yourself in someone else's shoes, the Snap Judgment podcast awaits. You could even shout at your phone device. "Siri, Alexa, play the Snap Judgment podcast and don't tell me you don't understand what I'm saying." Upgrade yourself. If you want the story behind the story, along with random thoughts, cat pictures, rants, and links to UFO sightings, follow me on the Twitter.

Snap is brought to you by the team that loves a good camping trip. Except for the uber producer, Mark Ristich, the only four seasons he enjoys is the hotel. Ms. Nancy López, Pat Mesiti-Miller, Regina Bediako, David Exumé, Anna Sussman, Renzo Gorrio, Shaina Shealy, Teo Ducot, Flo Wiley, John Fecile, Marisa Dodge, Davey Kim, Bo Walsh, and Annie Nguyen.

And this, this is not the news. No way is this the news. In fact, you could drink the last drop of the orange juice from the carton, put it right back in the refrigerator for someone else to deal with, and you would still, still not be as far away from the news as this is, but this is PRX.

[upbeat music]

*[Transcript provided by SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription]*