



CONTROLLED BURN

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CHAPTER ONE

I felt the fire before I saw it. It wasn't the suffocating heat or the smell of smoke that hit me first. Nor did I see the claws of flames that eventually reached into every corner to rip apart our lives. It's hard to explain what it means to *feel* a fire without sensing the heat of it, but that's what it was—a feeling. Maybe I noticed a change in the air, or got a weird Spidey-Sense that something was wrong? I guess I'll never know for sure.

All I *do* know for sure is, I was sitting on the couch, listening to music and thumbing through Instagram, when our house caught fire. Scrolling through my feed, I saw that a kid from my Spanish class had gotten a super-cute corgi puppy. A couple of people's stories had just reminded me it was my friend Isabel's thirteenth birthday (I quick-posted a happy birthday message, along with an old pic of the two of us from fifth-grade field day, plus hearts and a bunch of smiley faces). I'd also learned that a bunch of girls (a group I'm only sorta friends with) were out bowling together, which kind of made me jealous. A few minutes earlier, my mom had posted her Mom version of an artsy Insta picture—a glass of red wine perched beside a bright green plate loaded with grapes and cheese, all sitting atop a paperback copy of some book with a bunch of flowers on the cover.

Both my parents were out; Mom was at her book club across the street, and Dad was working at the hospital. The

only things I'd been tasked with were tucking my sister, Amelia, in, convincing her to fall asleep (not the easiest job), and unloading the dishwasher. A pretty regular kind of night.

I don't know what made me pull out my headphones, but I did—and that's when I felt it. A tingling, this *feeling* that something was not quite right. I slid my phone into the front pocket of my hoodie and pulled a blanket up over my knees, listening for creaks and voices. I won't lie; I was tempted to wake my little sister, so I'd have someone to comfort me. Even though she's younger, Amelia is the brave one, and she could always figure out how to make me laugh. In times of danger, I'd much rather hide under my covers and come out when everything is marked "all clear." Besides, I've half watched enough scary movies at sleepovers to know that having a *feeling* something isn't quite right means something probably *isn't* right.

Pretty much every possible scenario passed through my head. A sudden tornado. A nest of killer spiders. An intruder lurking around the corner in the kitchen, waiting to jump out and get me. All those things terrified me, and all of them suddenly seemed very possible.

Our basement had been ripped apart for months—we were finally getting a second bathroom, and a family room with a TV and hopefully a little fridge that would have cans of soda and bottles of Gatorade. (Dad was mostly excited because we were also getting a fancy new electrical panel that would let us run the toaster *and* the coffeepot at the

same time without blowing a fuse.) Just this past week, some of the guys who were working on the project had dug a big hole in the wall of our basement because of water leaking or something. So now, the only thing separating the inside from the outside was a flimsy piece of plastic that the workers taped up every night when they'd finished for the day. I suddenly realized it was entirely possible that a whole crew of bad guys—or raccoons—could easily poke through that plastic sheeting and move into our basement. I considered the fact that they could very easily be planning to take over the house and get rid of anyone in their way.

My heart beat furiously, drumming up every possible reason to be scared.

Had I known that the battery in the back hall smoke detector had been dead for years, and had I known that the construction crew unhooked the wires that connected that alarm to any other source of power, I would have had one more thing to worry about: fire. But I'd never even *thought* to worry about fire. I was scared of lots of things, but that had never been one of them.

I stood up and glanced out the front window, wishing Mom's book club would end so she would come home. But I could see a bunch of heads silhouetted behind the flimsy living room curtains at the neighbor's house, so I knew their hangout was still going strong.

That's when I smelled a faint whiff of something: a charred, smoky smell. It reminded me of the lingering smell of burned toast, but not as nice. My stomach clenched as

that feeling of something-not-right intensified, and I remember I suddenly felt like I was going to be sick. I crept toward the bathroom, deliberately walking softly and slowly so as not to wake my sister.

Why didn't I run? If I'd run, the whole night might have ended differently.

Back near the bathroom, the smell of burned toast intensified. At the front of our house were the living room, kitchen, and my parents' bedroom. The bathroom was right in the middle of everything, squeezed in next to the little office where Dad had studied for his nursing school tests. At the back of the house, my room and my sister's room had once been one big room that we split into two by putting up a wall in the middle.

I raced into the bathroom and immediately threw up. My nerves do this to me a lot. When I get worked up or worried about stuff, I puke. My dad calls it a "sensitive constitution" and promises my "tender nature" will serve me well later in life. Amelia and I call it wimpiness.

After I washed my face and cleaned my mouth—*why did I take the time to brush my teeth?!*—I stepped out of the bathroom, planning to tiptoe down the hall to peek in at my sister. But as soon as I opened the bathroom door, the smoke detector started screaming at the front of the house. And now, for the first time, I felt the heat. While I'd been puking and brushing behind the closed bathroom door, a wave of intense heat had built up in the hall. Now, as I stood there in shock, it nearly knocked me off my feet.

That's when I noticed a glow coming from underneath my bedroom door.

Suddenly, I remembered my candle. The drip candle I had begged my parents to buy me for Christmas. I'd bought an antique wine jug at a neighbor's garage sale and convinced Mom and Dad to get me a collection of tall, drippy candles to use with it. My friend Anne had given me a bright rainbow candle for my birthday this past year, and Beckett had found some yummy vanilla-scented ones that were also the most amazing blue color—the same sapphire blue as my sister's eyes. As each candle burned, the wax dripped down the edges of the jar. Over the past five months I'd already built up a lovely, thick wax coat of many colors on the outside of the bottle. I'd been burning a purple candle that afternoon, while I read in my room. But I blew it out before my parents left. That was the deal—I could only burn it when I was in my room to keep an eye on it, and when one of my parents was home. I'm a rule follower; I could almost guarantee I'd blown it out before dinner. But now I wasn't so sure.

I always kept my bedroom door closed—you do that when you have a nosy little sister and too little space to call your own—so I reached out and touched the outside of my sealed door. It felt hot. I still remembered the firefighters' lesson when they visited our school in the second or third grade: Don't touch the handle or open a door if you think there's fire on the other side. Some sort of autopilot—or that Spidey-Sense again—told me *not to open the door*. My room was clearly on fire.

My room.

On fire.

I could feel my stomach rolling and heaving as I stumbled toward my sister's room. I'd left her door open a crack after I tucked her in for the night. She made me promise, so the hall light would scare any monsters away. Monsters were the only thing my sister seemed to be afraid of.

Now, just an hour after I'd snuggled with her and told her to close up her brain and shut down for the night, I pushed Amelia's bedroom door open all the way. As soon as I did, a wall of heat and smoke hit me like an ocean wave. The shock of it nearly knocked me over, but I urged myself to step forward; to get inside her room and get her out.

Go, I told myself.

Get her, my brain screamed.

Amelia! But my feet wouldn't move.

The smoke detector wailed and screamed at the front of the house, echoing my thoughts aloud.

I don't know if I'm remembering this right, but I'm pretty sure I was frozen in place for a few seconds. Flames licked at Amelia's curtains, her desk, the walls. The fire had formed a sort of yellowish-orange ring around the base of her bed.

My sister has always been a deep sleeper. She can sleep through almost anything. House-shaking thunderstorms, our neighbor's dog barking, a gas stop during road trips, even loud movies. Once, she somehow slept through a fire alarm at the hotel we were staying at on a trip to Wisconsin Dells. Someone had accidentally pulled the alarm, and

everyone had to evacuate their rooms in the middle of the night. While I shuffled downstairs in my pajamas and bare feet, Mom had to carry a sleeping Amelia down six flights of stairs because she wouldn't wake up no matter how hard they shook her.

On that awful spring night, while I was the one in charge of keeping her safe, my sister must have somehow slept through the early stages of a house fire. But suddenly, someone—me, I think—was screaming. Luckily, the terrorized scream jolted Amelia awake. “Get up!” I shouted. “We have to go!”

But just as I said that, a tendril of flame danced across Amelia's litter- and laundry-strewn carpet. It caught the babyish pink bed skirt she'd been begging Dad to take off her bed for months. Fire tore at the edges of her mattress, casting her sweet face in terrifying light. She reached for me.

I screamed.

She screamed. “Maia, help me!”

I can still hear that cry, the way she wailed as the flames caught her T-shirt and ripped into her hair. Smoke filled the room, making it hard to breathe as I stared at my sister trapped inside a cage of flames.

My memory gets fuzzy after that, but later that night, someone—I'm not sure if it was Mom or Dad or one of the firefighters—told me I'd been very brave and pulled my sister to safety. I don't know how, and I don't know when I willed my feet to move, but I guess I pulled her out by the leg, maybe because it had been the only part of her body not

in flames. They confirmed I pulled her by the leg, because I'd somehow managed to break it during the escape.

Somehow, eventually, the flames—the ones that had tried to swallow my sister—went out.

A neighbor in back had seen the fire through our bedroom windows and called the fire department at the same time our next-door neighbor heard the smoke alarm wailing and came over to check that everything was all right. From her vantage point across the street, Mom hadn't seen a thing. Only the back half of the house had caught fire. The front looked perfectly normal—until the firefighters came in and blasted water through the entire place. I didn't get to see that part. By then, they'd loaded me into an ambulance.

Amelia and my mom were long gone, having been whisked off to the trauma center. So I rode to the hospital alone with a really nice paramedic who sang songs to keep me calm and didn't care when I puked on her shoe. Dad was waiting for me at the hospital, and he was crying, so I puked again.

Mom said it's lucky I noticed something felt wrong as early as I did. My interpretation of that comment? If I hadn't had that Spidey-Sense, my sister and I would both be dead.

But can you really call it “lucky” when your sister is knocked out in the hospital with critical burns over nearly half her body and your house is completely destroyed? And can you really call it luck—or take credit for any part of your sister's heroic rescue—when the fire was all your fault to begin with?