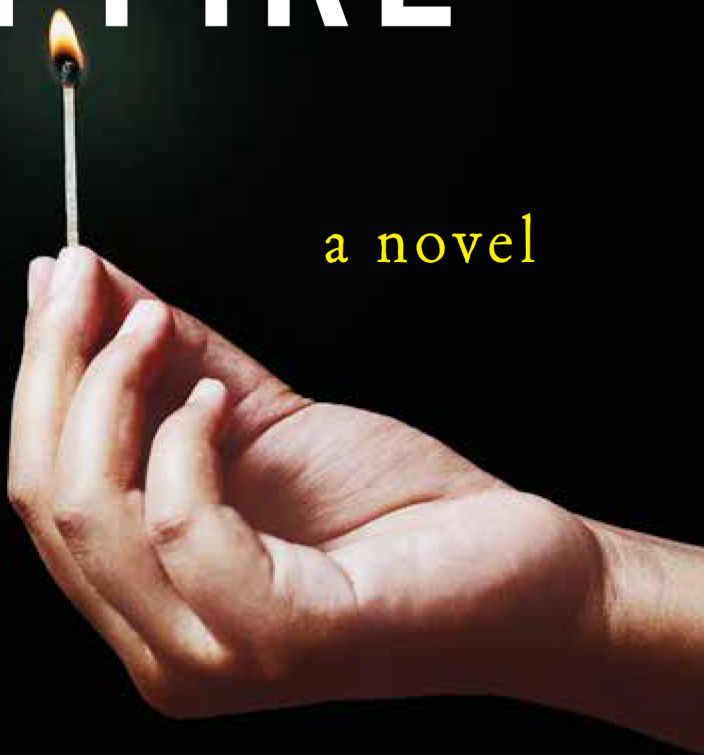


WILL END IN FIRE

a novel



Nicole Bokar

TWENTY-SEVEN-YEAR-OLD ELLIE STONE has spent her life locked in an unending rivalry with her brother, Josh—star athlete and golden boy—turned—drug addict. One night, after their parents have left her at their home to “babysit” Josh, the siblings have a blow-up and she abandons him. Soon after, the house is engulfed in fire—and Josh is terribly injured. Social media takes this on as a local cause célèbre, blaming Ellie since, years ago, she was involved in a blaze that scarred a teenage girl.

In shock, Ellie can’t recall if she left a lit cigarette in her family home. But could this suspected arson have something to do with the unknown vehicle that was spotted nearby? As she grows closer to her brother’s inner circle, Ellie discovers secrets that make her question whom to trust, how to stay out of danger, and how to save her future.

“Bokat reveals the solution to the mystery bit by bit, like a jigsaw puzzle, leaving the full picture obscured until the final piece is finally in place. . . . A tumultuous narrative that will confound readers’ expectations and keep them guessing.”

—KIRKUS REVIEWS

“Hang on to your breath, because you’ll be holding it the whole time you read Nicole Bokat’s fascinating thriller about love, loyalty, family, and the secrets that could save—or even kill—us. Set against a backdrop of a mysterious fire, *Will End in Fire* introduces characters so real and vivid, you swear they’re beside you. Just extraordinary.”

—CAROLINE LEAVITT, *New York Times* best-selling author
of *Pictures of You* and *With or Without You*

“Intense, heart-wrenching, and instantly addictive, *Will End in Fire* took my breath away. Nicole Bokat expertly follows the fault lines between a character’s past and present—and how they can collide with the force of a lightning strike. An unforgettable read.”

—HILARY DAVIDSON, author of *Her Last Breath*

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PRAISE FOR
Will End in Fire

"A page-turning mystery, a suspenseful domestic drama, a deep psychological character study of warring siblings, and a heartbreaking addiction saga all rolled into one poignant, powerful novel. Unputdownable."

—Susan Shapiro, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Unhooked*,
Lighting Up, and *The Forgiveness Tour*

"Nicole Bokar has once again weaved together scintillating storytelling with gorgeous prose. . . . a haunting, poetic thriller."

—Judy Batalion, *New York Times* best-selling author of *The Light of Days*

"I blazed through Bokar's fiery, fast-paced new thriller in a single sitting. Navigating the perilous terrain of sibling rivalry, arson, addiction, rape culture, climate change, and a pandemic, the novel's riveting twists are driven by the questions: Who can Ellie Stone trust? What will it take for her to trust herself? What is the price if she doesn't? You'll turn these stunning pages with your heart pounding and your hands on fire."

—Tess Callahan, author of *April & Oliver* and *Dawnland*

"This novel will grab you from the first sentence and won't let you go until the last. A riveting story of love, loss, and fear that raises questions about how childhood events and family dynamics shape us, influencing what we remember, who we believe, and whether we can change the patterns of our lives."

—Anastasia Zadeik, author of *Blurred Fates*
and *The Other Side of Nothing*

PRAISE FOR
The Happiness Thief

“Bokat is an evocative wordsmith. . . . she has crafted a sympathetic heroine as her main character. . . . A compulsively readable mystery and character study.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“So, so smart, and as downright dangerous a read as the edge of a razor, Bokat’s book is a masterful study of memory, family, and the lies that derail us. Don’t even dare to think you’ll get any sleep once you start reading.”

—Caroline Leavitt, *New York Times* best-selling author of
Pictures of You and *With or Without You*

“Sharp, quick-witted, with twists you can’t foresee, Bokat’s smart new thriller is like a cyanide pill wrapped in chocolate truffle—dangerous but irresistible. *The Happiness Thief* will swallow you whole.”

—Tess Callahan, author of *April & Oliver*

“Evocatively written and ferociously paced, Bokat’s latest is a puzzle-box wrapped in a paranoia tale that rivets while exploring the complexities of grief, the anxieties of modern life, and the lasting harm of childhood trauma. Ulterior motives and shocking reveals abound, making for an anxious read that domestic suspense fans will be tempted to devour in a single sitting.”

—*Mystery Scene Magazine*



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A Novel

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SHE WRITES PRESS

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For Jay

FIRE AND ICE

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

— ROBERT FROST



prologue

I didn't start the fire.

That was the one fact I needed everyone to know—everyone who mattered and even those who didn't. Yes, I'd smoked a cigarette that night, but only *one*, out of frustration from being stuck at my family home: after a long commute from my job below downtown Manhattan to my apartment in Washington Heights to pick up my car and drive to our suburban New Jersey town. I'd been summoned to babysit my younger brother, Josh, the week before he was to start another round of treatment for addiction to both the Adderall he claimed he needed and the Ativan he took to counteract it. That wasn't how my dad had worded this favor, of course, since Josh was a twenty-four-year-old former midfielder at a Division 1 college. Our family's golden-legged Hermes who'd lost his footing since graduation. The brother who used to be the boy of my heart, my companion in navigating both our parents' expectations and our escapist adventures in the wooded nature reserve near our house. I'd been the fearless guide, dragging his sled on a snowy path, or hopping from rock to rock in a shallow stream, cocky even when I lost my way.

"Keep an eye on him," Dad had said. "I need to take Mom away for our anniversary."

Later, rumors of what happened spread as quickly as those flames that crackled in our front hall. It wasn't the sound of camp and roasted marshmallows but of land scorched by the enemy. That enemy was me. The last words I'd spoken to Josh had been: "Drop dead."



chapter one

Early September 2019

It was after midnight when the ball hitting the garage door woke me. That thump was the sound of my childhood. The sound hadn't changed—not even now, when practicing no longer mattered—but Josh had.

As a boy, he'd ask me to quiz him on his vocabulary words and to check his math sheet answers because I was a wonder girl, pulling in all As and glowing evaluations from teachers. We'd giggle when Mom drove us to school until, suddenly, when Josh turned twelve, he sprang up and grew muscles and became his own kind of golden. One coach after another singled him out as special. Special in a way I'd never be, in a way that demanded attention and budgeting and alterations in our parents' schedules. My brother would position his gym bag between us and stick in his earbuds and only talk to Mom about which away game was when, or could she pick up some extra protein bars for him at ShopRite. It wasn't the withdrawal of affection that stung the most. It was how he treated me like I was a random passenger, along for his life's ride.

When I began confronting him about how he ignored me, he claimed to be busy and that I was just jealous—which was true. But

still, I missed him. I thought I'd become hardened to the loss, but then I was rarely in his company for such long stretches anymore.

This weekend, I'd asked him to keep the noise to a minimum. I had two articles to finish copyediting by Monday, so I couldn't just slog through the weekend bleary, thick with fatigue.

I traipsed down the stairs into the dining room.

The table was dorm-dirty: his dinner of take-out pasta with meat sauce in its aluminum container, topped by two browned banana peels, a pair of filthy workout socks, the morning's fried eggs, rivulets of yolk congealed on a paper plate—to avoid the strenuous act of loading the dishwasher—empty bottles of sports drinks. Whales would choke to death on plastic as a sacrifice to the gods of Goal Scoring. I'd left my vegan leather backpack on the floor—the high-end one I'd splurged on when I'd gotten my new job last year. One of the bottles was knocked on its side, dripping onto my bag.

Josh slid open the glass door to the deck, letting himself back into the house, phone pressed against his ear.

"You're such a dick!" I shouted.

Josh fierce-whispered, "Auds, hold on, okay? One minute." He held the cell to his chest to keep our conversation private.

Auds. Short for Audrey, his girlfriend of several years, a Celtic beauty with slightly freckled skin and long, brown eyelashes. Audrey had maybe spoken one full sentence to me in all this time. I wasn't sure if her silence was due to introversion or possessiveness. The way she grasped onto Josh, as if she'd fractured her foot and he were her crutch, made me wonder about their relationship. Josh was so happy around her—at least until he started using again and his life stalled—always smiling in her presence, as if he'd scored the winning point. But her clinginess wasn't good for someone who was sinking.

Josh's gaze was steady and cold. "What's your problem?"

“Ever think about anyone else?” I grabbed my backpack, now speckled with Gatorade marks. “First you wake me up, then you ruin my stuff!”

“And?”

“Look at this place. You treat the house like a dump.”

“Are you the clean-up crew?” he asked, as he squatted down to untie his sneakers.

“Don’t confuse me with your former stalker fans.” Okay, that was cruel. While in college, Josh always had an entourage, being tall and lanky with tousled hair and big hazel eyes, that quirk of a smile. Now, he slept past when my parents left for work and holed up in his room in the evenings, even eating dinner alone. “I’m only here for Dad, making sure you don’t OD.”

“Are you planning to scoop out my pee from the bowl for Dad to test?”

“You’re disgusting.”

“At least I’m not pathetic,” he said. “Stay the fuck out of my business.”

“Drop dead,” I told him.

“You wish,” he said, and then to Audrey, “I’ll call you right back.” He took off his dirt-encrusted sneakers and plopped them on a dining room chair before he left the room.

Was Josh’s animosity pharmaceutically induced? Mine, at least, had merit.

My parents had discovered Josh’s drug paraphernalia when he came home sophomore year of college and confronted him. “Victory at any cost,” was the excuse Josh gave. “Coach would spike the Gatorade if it ensured a win against Maryland.” My dad reported this to me: the Adderall for focus, the pills to relax. But I was living in the city by then, and, for a long time, not part of the triangular construction my

family had become. “He’ll grow out of it, Dad,” I said. *Or he won’t.* I didn’t chase that thought down and examine the outcome. My parents’ obsession with my brother intensified and nothing they did seemed to help, not even the first stint in rehab last summer, not the expensive shrinks, not the threat of losing his college scholarship, which he’d managed to avert, not the two years of unemployment since graduation.

I was tired of it. And tired of squelching my anger.

In my bedroom, I lit a cigarette. I was down to three a day but would make an exception this weekend. Although my mom used the space as an office, my shelves still displayed my chipped plastic trophies for academic achievements, the poster board with pictures from prom—one with Alexander Liu, another AP kid, the rest of me and Nora, in our black dresses and never-before-or-again spiked heels. For so long, we’d been all drive and hustle. Once we’d received the congratulatory emails from our first-choice schools, we vowed to loosen up, party on weekends, like normal teens. Prom was not about our lab partner dates but about us, the pact we’d made to succeed. Here we were—on the same path, still best friends and now roommates—nearly a decade later.

After stuffing my clothes into my bag, I texted Nora. She’d be binge-watching her baking show, taking notes on how to recreate the chocolate mirror cakes and the ginger biscuits. Which I got to sample.

Sick to death of Josh. Let him OD.

I didn’t mean that, of course. I just wanted this version of Josh to vanish, not the brother I’d grown up with, the boy who watched the Cartoon Network with me before the pink streaks of dawn, who taught me how to do chin-ups on the bar in the garage, stood in line with me outside the bookstore for the final Harry Potter book, even though he never read the series, and convinced my parents to adopt

our black shepherd on my behalf. When the vet euthanized Merlin, a few weeks before the dog's fourteenth birthday and my departure for college, Josh was the one to sob until his nose ran into the corners of his mouth.

WHAT happened?

Tell you mañana. Don't wait up!

Thumbs-up emoji from Nora.

In the car, on I-95 to the Washington Bridge, listening to Sia swing from the chandelier, I cast around my bag for cigarettes. Without a caffeine kick, nicotine would have to do. My hand toured the contents—wallet, T-shirts, cotton sweatpants, copy of *The Perishable World*, which I'd ordered after editing a Q&A with the author for my relatively low-paying but challenging job, which I loved. Where were my Marlboros? Bigger question: Where was my laptop?

Shitshitshit.

All those gas emissions and outrage for nothing. I exited south and headed north again, cursing my way back to the suburbs. By the time I arrived on our cul-de-sac, all I wanted to do was crawl onto the thin-cushioned couch and sleep. That's when I saw the sun bursting low in the sky. It took me a moment to realize that it wasn't the sun at all.

The house was on fire.

It was enormous, blasting out of the first-floor window. Josh was inside.

My fingers searched for my phone, keys, and a pair of underwear I wore as a glove. *Call 911!* I thought of an article I'd written for my college newspaper on school shootings, how the average response time for police was eighteen minutes. No one was coming to rescue Josh any faster than I could.

I raced across the lawn. The door was locked, the keyhole fur-

nace-hot, as were the shale stones of the entranceway, which were cold in all seasons. Hyperventilating, I edged my way forward. The fumes pushed at me with such purpose, the heat like no other, a crematorium. I pulled my T-shirt over my mouth and nose, as my dad had taught me to do ages ago.

Good to be prepared, Ellie. In case.

“Josh?” I screamed into my shirt. Why wasn’t he tearing from the living room, the way he did across a field, fleet and sure?

I blinked against the haze. The odor was a mixture of singed carpet, cigarettes, and chemistry lab gasses. I started coughing, then couldn’t stop. How would I make my way up one flight, then another?

I had to get him. I couldn’t get him. *Oh God, oh God, oh God.* Tears blocked my vision. The rush in my ears built.

There was no choice.

That’s what I’d later tell my parents. I was practicing my defense even as I begged my brother to emerge from the vapors.

Turning back, I fought the fog, scorching my arm on the door-knob. Across the way, the Petersons’ Colonial sat placidly, the porch light winking. I scrambled onto the street, hacking and thirsty for the fresh air.

“Ellie!” Mrs. Peterson waved at me. She was in a nightgown, her face bright and shiny from lotion. “Hurry!”

There was a bellow. A gray-and-orange lion’s head of flames smashed through glass. My hands over my head, I ducked. One side of our roof caved in, crashing into the dormer window. The crush in my gut: the reach of the danger now, all the way to the third floor, Josh’s room.

When my brother didn’t appear, I reeled backward. I could feel myself falling, close to fainting—but not quite.

“Let’s go,” Mrs. Peterson said, lifting me up, her touch firm. “I’ve

called the fire department. They're on their way. They have the best chance of helping Josh."

I should have been the one to call.

"I have to get him."

"Honey, you can't. Are you dizzy? Faint?" When I nodded, she said, "Come with me. You need water, and it's not good for you to watch this."

"No. I have to stay here. I can't leave him alone in there." I was seized with trepidation. Out it came in great heaves, then, the contents of my stomach.

"Come on. Just for a minute, to get your bearings," she said firmly. "There's nothing you can do; you're in shock. Emergency services instructed me to keep you away." She coached me up her pathway and into her hallway.

I was hyperventilating and lightheaded, but I noticed her daughters' denim jackets hanging on the hall tree, a transparent umbrella with yellow dots on it, a vase of honeysuckle seated on the bench. I'd babysat for them a few times when the youngest was a toddler, the summer before my senior year of college.

What the fuck are you doing here?

"Wait one sec. Sit down and take deep breaths."

As she hurried to the kitchen, I glanced at the dark stairway, leading to her girls' rooms, stacked in their bunk beds, her ex-husband less than a mile away in his split-level condo. "Henry Peterson deserted his family," my mother once remarked.

Deserter!

Mrs. Peterson handed me a bottle of water and I drank in quick gulps, practically slurping, my chin wet.

"Where are your parents, hon?"

"At the beach."

"I'll call them." Her eyes were full of pity.

Rubbing my chin, I noticed smudges on my palm. Coughing up more phlegm and ash, I wiped my mouth with my sooty T-shirt.

"You have to be seen by a doctor," Mrs. Peterson said.

"I'll be okay." I was trembling as if stuck inside a butcher's freezer. As much as I wanted to bolt, my body wasn't obeying.

"Mommy? What's going on?" one of the girls cried out from the top of the stairs.

"It's okay, sweetie," Mrs. Peterson answered. "I'll be right there." To me, she said, "I just have to get them settled. I left a message for your mom. No details about your poor brother, just that you're here with me. They have a long drive. So, let's get them here safely."

"Thanks."

"You almost passed out. Why don't I get the girls up and we can take you to the hospital."

Then the blare of sirens jarred me into action, some clumsy acrobatic motion through the parlor. Racing and hacking. "Gotta go."

The street was a carnival: the ambulance's blue-and-red lights, the fire engine, shiny as an ornament, the men in bright yellow helmets, tanks strapped to their backs. Mrs. Goldsmith, our next-door neighbor, had bullied her way into the action, as usual. Without her glued-on eyelashes, in her lilac robe and bracelet around her veiny ankle, she seemed older. Her basset hound howled through her open window.

I ran toward my house, the sprays of water shooting into the blaze. A paramedic extended her arm to stop me. "You can't go any closer."

"I live here."

She regarded me with greater interest. "You have to be checked for inhalation."

"No, please," I cried. "I need to see my brother, make sure he got out. I was only in the house for a minute."

"Someone else will take care of him. My job is to get you on the truck." She hoisted me onto a cot, her strength a surprise. She was slight and short, but with weight-lifter biceps. "How's your breathing?" When I nodded, she asked, "Headache?"

"No."

"Hoarseness or coughing?"

"Some," I admitted. Statistics from those pieces about the never-ending California fires sprang into my mind, how toxic smoke could cause long-term health effects.

She clipped a plastic sensor to my finger hooked up to a handheld device. "Good." She clicked a light into my eyes.

"Where's Josh, my brother?"

She squinted. "Do you know where he was in the residence?"

I pressed my hand to my chest. "Upstairs. Third floor."

Her expression didn't change, but I knew she was calculating the odds.

"Anyone else in there?"

"No. My parents are on their way."

"Let's get you strapped in." She leaned over me, fastened one belt over my waist, another just above my knees. "I'm going to slip this on. It's oxygen."

"Why?"

"A necessary precaution."

She'd tucked the tubes over my ears when the doors to the ambulance swung open and a male paramedic called out, "Cooling towels and water bottles, Ginny. Hurry!"

"Be right there," my helper said.

I shut my eyes to the shuffle and heft of the men. I tasted vomit.

"Hang in there, buddy," one said. "We're on our way."

Turning over, I saw what I could never un-see. Two paramedics were carrying Josh out on a gurney. His face was bubbling, volcanic. His hands were charred, shedding skin onto his sheet. A fist was in my throat causing me to gag until I bent over, tore the mask away, and heaved onto the floor.

"I'll take care of it," Ginny reassured me.

I couldn't stop shivering.

"How are you feeling?" a voice asked.

"Where am I?" Another slim mattress, this time in a narrow room. Ahead of me were glass doors and, by my side, a monitor that beeped an alarm.

"You're in our most luxurious ER accommodations. I got you out of the fray."

I stared at this woman—twenty-five, tops—dark-skinned with her hair braided around her head like a wreath.

"I'm Mia, your own private nurse," she said, smiling. "I just need to draw some blood and get these suckers attached. Now that you're up, let's get you into this lovely gown." She handed me a cotton garment the color of canned string beans. "You can keep on your underwear."

"Where is he?"

"Who's that, honey?" she asked.

I struggled to sit up. "My brother. Where is he?"

"Let's wait until the doctor comes, then we can figure out what's what."

"I just need to know he's okay."

"We'll do that, as quickly as possible." Nurse Mia helped me undress. As she pushed metal buttons onto my bare chest, one after the

other, she bent over me. “EKG to measure your heart activity. No worries. Standard stuff.” She adjusted the tentacles of wire.

The cuff around my arm was too tight as she stuck a needle deep into my vein. Watching the tubes fill made me queasy again.

“Easy, partner,” Mia said, snapping off the rubber band from my arm. “You can release your fist. Let me get you another blanket.”

“When did I get here?”

“Just a few minutes ago. You fell asleep on the ride.”

Picturing the seared pit of my brother’s face, his ashy, peeling hand, I started to sweat. “That’s impossible, with Josh in that shape.”

“Trauma can do that. Nothing to be ashamed of. Here you go.” She gently laid a cotton sheath over the one covering me.

The glass door slid open, and a blonde with seashell earrings walked in. Her clogs made a clapping sound. “Hi, Eleanor. I’m Dr. Berry.” She lifted her stethoscope and placed it—so cold—above my breast. She lifted my gown. “Any pain?”

“There’s some superficial scalding on the right hand,” Mia said, “wrapped in transport.”

Shaking my head, I said, “I’m not hurt. It’s my brother you should help.”

“I’m sure he’s getting the best care. I’m going to roll you over on your left side to take a look at your back, then your feet and hands,” the doctor said. Her touch was light and quick.

“Please, where is he?” I repeated. Someone had to locate him, to communicate with me.

Dr. Berry exchanged a cautionary glance with Mia. “If you mean the young man in the house fire, he’s being treated in the burn unit. We are the top facility in the state.”

“Is he going to be . . . okay?” The only thing that mattered was returning my brother to himself, the person he was only hours ago.

Dr. Berry glanced at my palms. "Let's get you a chest X-ray."

"I just ran into the house for a minute. They already checked me for smoke inhalation in the ambulance."

"It's standard procedure. I'm sure you'll be fine."

"I need information on Josh, please."

"I'll do my best. For now, try to relax."

"What about my parents?" I asked. "Are they here?"

"I don't know their status."

The walls were empty, no pictures, no clock. I had no sense of how much time had passed. "They're driving from the shore, but there can't be much traffic this late."

She moved closer to me. "I'll ask if they've arrived." She patted my leg, then pulled Mia aside. She spoke in a low voice, but I caught, "They need to be made aware . . ."

Mia curled the loose strands that had broken free of her braids on the back of her neck. I couldn't hear her response.

"I'll call the desk," Dr. Berry told me.

"I already told the paramedic about them," I said.

"I'll make sure that the message was received. We need to do a few tests. Mia can take care of that and Carla will be here shortly with the X-ray machine to take images, so you don't even have to leave your room."

When she was gone, I exhaled. "Can I use my phone? Pants pocket. I need to reach my roommate. She'll be really worried."

"Two minutes." Mia fished out my cell for me. "I'll give you some privacy."

Hoisting the thin blanket around my shoulders, I thanked her. But my thoughts had drifted elsewhere, envisioning Josh as a boy. All that incessant thwacking of the soccer ball, the running laps around the block, that dopamine rush that caused him to fidget on long car

rides, crack his knuckles and roll his head from side to side. “It’s gonna fall off if you keep that up,” I used to joke. “Doesn’t that make you dizzy?” He’d poke my thigh with his index finger. “Nope.” I’d call him “freak,” and he’d challenge me to a race, “once we get there”—wherever the destination might be. I’d counter with a “sitting still” contest. Although never discussed, we envied the other’s innate skills.

My mother singled out my brother as the star, the tale of his kicking in the womb, his footprint pushed against her belly, recited to whomever would listen. Josh balked at her attention, used his anxiety as fuel to train harder. Shrugged it off when I complained to him. “Double-edged sword, Elle.” Then, in his second year of high school, I was gone and his responses to my frequent texts were monosyllabic or nonexistent. First came Audrey, then drugs—and I never was certain which one dragged him from his path into some dank, twilight forest. Away from me.

Now, he might never emerge again. I trembled as I called Nora, who picked up on the second ring.

“Where the hell are you? I’ve tried you ten times.”

“Sorry.” I started to sob.

“Jesus! Elle,” she said when I told her what had happened. “Okay, the train schedule . . . The first one is at 5:06 a.m. I’ll make it.”

“Nora, listen,” I whispered, “what if it’s my fault?” I grabbed my phone closer to my ear and saw what I’d done in my mind’s eye. The scarred face and hand, the accusations on the bathroom wall: *Ellie Stone is an arsonist.*

“What if it’s my fault *again*?”



chapter two

March 2008

The first fire happened when I was sixteen. I was a pity pick for two popular girls, Anna Nuñez and Claudia Adler, who needed to sign up others for extra credit community work, digging through rich people's clothes to distribute to charity. Anna had told me, "This could get you on the list for a college scholarship, plus at least one expensive item to keep. We're doing it at my place." I figured the deal would include forking over homework in the two classes we had together, but it seemed worth it so I agreed to go.

I bypassed Anna's ginormous house and multiple-level deck to reach the garage, which was free of cars. There was one folding table set up, on top of which was a bottle of Grey Goose and a stack of plastic cups. Anna was smoking while her bestie moved a few cans of paint thinner that were lined up on the floor, tossing aside the oily rags on top of them in the process.

I pointed to the cloth scraps. "Those should be thrown away."

Claudia rolled her eyes and said, "Chill out!"

She dragged over another table that was lying against the wall, opened it, then lifted a cardboard box filled with garments onto the makeshift furniture.

Anna poured herself a shot of vodka and then offered me a cup, which I took even though I rarely drank and then, only wine or beer. She flashed me a hooded look. She was all about the red lips and thick brows, the black lashes and long tresses to her tailbone. Anna's gig was gloss and glamour and who knew whom.

Which, as it turned out, was the reason for the invitation. "Hey, isn't Josh Stone your brother?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"My younger brother went to the same soccer camp. He told me your sib is going to be some big-shot athlete, that your parents are *super invested*."

My oh-so-sick-of-Josh-being-the-favorite default kicked in. I took a sip of my drink, not minding the medicinal taste.

I'd been counting my grievances over the last year: how my mom taped Josh's sports schedule to the refrigerator, hiding my school flyers, how she chopped up strawberries and bananas for his breakfast smoothies while I reached inside the kitchen cabinet for a box of cold cereal, how she hunched over his French assignment with him and spoke softly, "For the *passé composé*, you conjugate like this." I worked solo unless some random question about government arose in one of my classes. Mostly I used Google, but occasionally I consulted my dad.

"Can we get going here?" Claudia asked, though she wasn't moving to do anything else, and both girls were looking at me. "I have a date with Jake Thompson later."

"Are we the only ones here?" I asked. "Where is everyone?"

Claudia shrugged in that listless way of hers; she wore the persona of indifference like the sheerest of wings. "No-shows. So, more to do. Here's the deal: Only box the 'gently used' stuff. Nothing ripped or stained. Hats and scarves are okay, shoes are out."

Anna said, "If there's anything you want to keep, I mean that you

absolutely can't live without . . ." She stomped out her cigarette underfoot. "You can keep it if you do the work for us."

"Sure," I said, oh-so-casual.

I started to sort through merino tops, pleated pants, velvet leggings, a *Girl Power* T-shirt, a salmon-colored tutu, and boys' polos with various designer logos on them.

I held up a pink trench coat.

Anna sighed wistfully. "That was mine."

Even I, who knew little about fashion, recognized the Burberry label and that the price tag had to have been ludicrous. I had the snarky privileged thought that some kid in faded cords and scuffed sneakers was going to wear this coat to her free school breakfast. *Don't be an asshole*, I scolded myself. Never had I worried about paying for cafeteria food. True, my mom skimped on retail, taking me to the outlet mall for blowout sales. She was saving for Josh's future: travel costs, hotels, tutors in case he still struggled in math and French. I'd overheard her talking to my father about "his potential," about university scholarships for her thirteen-year-old. I put the trench coat on the side to keep for myself.

But owning designer garb wasn't my main concern. No matter how stellar my academic record, in order for me to attend a top college, I'd have to take out loans that would follow behind me like the longest, most expensive dress train in history. Which made me wonder: Would I find things worth serious cash on eBay?

A few minutes later, I felt this cool, smooth object tucked into the front pocket of a pair of pants. It was a cigarette lighter, lacquered blue with a scripted name on the gold trim, a diamond chip on one corner. Sleek and expensive.

I flipped open the lid and turned it on. The sparks shot out, low but steady.

Anna whipped around. “Hey, that’s my mom’s. Where’d you get it?”

I closed the lid. “In these.” I shook out the crinkled linen trousers.

“Give it to me,” Anna said, her hand out.

“You said that I could take what I want. This is what I want.”

“You don’t even smoke.”

“Maybe I’m planning to start.”

Claudia clucked, her arms crossed. “Really, Stone? You’re suddenly this party girl ’cause we grace you with one invite?”

“My mother obviously didn’t realize she’d left it there,” Anna said. “Do you know how much that costs?”

That’s the point.

I clutched this prize harder. “You made a deal. I’m doing all the work here.”

Anna peered at me as if reassessing a bad investment. “Everyone knows you’re a total grind. But a thief—that’s news!”

I chugged the rest of the peppery liquid, warmth spreading through my chest like a layer of insulation. “You steal my trig answers all the time.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Well, technically, I *let* you. You can let me ‘steal’ this.”

“That’s not the same thing.”

Anna blocked my way, so I’d have to shuffle sideways to leave. She fanned out her hand.

There was that thwacking sound in my head, my brother kicking the ball over and over, afternoon into evening, a sound I used to associate with comfort, with comradery. Anger rose in me, the anger of my role in the family, of never winning that first-place trophy. Oh, how I yearned to keep this prize. Right then I decided, I’d earned that right.

I played with the lighter again, at the same time that Anna lunged at me, grabbing my wrist. "Ow!" I said, as her nails tore into my skin, knocking the prize out of my hand. I saw, then, the sleeve of her cardigan was glowing.

"Shit!" she shouted.

Claudia tore the sweater off Anna's shoulders and flung it to the ground.

Instantly, I realized the magnitude of her mistake. Ignited by the rags, a blaze burst forth. It rushed up, kissing Anna's cheek like a treacherous lover, just missing Claudia, who quickly stepped aside.

I grabbed my phone out of my pants pocket to call 911. All I could get out was the word "help." And then I saw how the flames were burgeoning like orange ghosts. They were climbing up the wood wall of the garage. Soon they would reach the roof, then the vine-covered trees close by.

"We have to get out of here!" I shouted.

Claudia led her whimpering friend, the awful odors of singed hair and fried flesh emanating off Anna.

We huddled together outside, Anna weeping and cradling the side of her face, shushing herself. Nobody even glanced at me. I knew Anna's wound needed to be treated immediately but was afraid to move, as if one wrong step could cause another catastrophe. Within minutes, the first responders arrived one after the other. My head felt heavy, and my vision glazed over. I watched as the firemen hosed down the garage until it was filled with soot, gray fog, and the pieces of collapsed roof—a pile of tar-colored slates on the soaking cement. The shell remained and two men stepped inside, one taking photographs, the other surveying the damage. The paramedics insisted on examining Claudia and me before whisking Anna away in their ambulance.

A beaky fireman holding a clipboard approached us in the drive-

way, where we'd been directed to wait. He was carrying a charred object, no longer that lovely, varnished blue, and held it out in his thick-gloved hand. "Who does this belong to?"

"Ellie," Claudia said.

I stared at Claudia, her blonde hair covered with ash, all that glow gone.

"What are you talking about? It's Anna's mom's."

"She tried to steal it!"

"Hey, Caruso!" the other man called out, Grey Goose bottle in his hand. "Someone was partying."

"Okay, Keith. You girls stay here. I'm going to have to call the police to sort this out. You might want to get your parents on the phone."

"Why?" Claudia asked. "It was Ellie who did this. I saved Anna's life."

"You can explain what went down to the officers."

"Check this out, Dom!" Keith exclaimed, holding up, then sniffing a charred can. "Paint thinner. Cap's off."

I said solemnly, "I told them that was dangerous."

The police arrived, a young guy with a buzz cut and toned arms, and a Black woman, probably in her early forties, with her hair pulled back and gold studs in her ears. They separated us and, of course, the man chose to speak with Claudia.

Officer Turner's name was etched on her badge. She had me blow into a Breathalyzer tube. "It's .04 percent," she said.

"Is that bad?"

"It's under the legal limit. Still not a good idea to drive while intoxicated."

"I don't have my license yet. That's not an issue, the driving part," I said, stupidly flippant.

"No way!" Claudia cried, and I spun around. She was shaking her head, ash flying onto her shoulders. "I didn't do anything."

"What's going on?" I asked Turner.

"You each need to have a guardian meet you at the station."

My legs felt quivery, like they might fail me. "Are you arresting us?"

"We just need to talk to you with an adult present," she stated. It was obvious Officer Turner wasn't a fan of drama.

"My dad works in the city. He comes home really late," Claudia said. "And my mom owns a café. It's open until six."

Officer Biceps—his real name was out of sight—stretched out one large hand, the knuckles callused. He moved closer to Claudia.

He wants to touch her.

Turner noticed but didn't react. Maybe it was a habit of his: resisting the urge to hit on pretty, teenage girls. Maybe his partner was used to ignoring his perversion.

"What about *your* folks?" Turner asked. Her eyes on me were steady, the brows as arched as boomerangs.

"No problem."

My mother's schedule changed daily, but it didn't matter if she was showing a house or driving Josh to an away game. My dad had finished teaching his jurisprudence seminar and was probably heading home. Better a law professor than a realtor, better my tender, philosophical dad than my determined, exacting mom.

"I'll call my dad," I said.

He was listed under "Favorites" on my phone, and as soon as he answered, I spoke quickly. "There's this problem at, um, a friend's house. The police are here. I swear, it was an accident."

"Don't say a word more about what happened," he said, his voice the same quiet timbre as always. "I'm leaving now. Tell them I'll meet you there."

He had to believe me, the good, steady, hardworking daughter who never before had gotten into trouble, not at school and, certainly, not with the law.

At the station, seated on a tottering chair, I recounted the series of events while Officer Turner wrote in a notepad.

“Why didn’t you return her possession back to Ms. Nuñez?”

I didn’t dare glimpse in his direction. What he must have thought. “She promised me I could take what I wanted. It was a misunderstanding.”

“So, you weren’t threatening her?”

My father’s hand, on my knee, rested more heavily.

“Of course not,” I said.

“Captain Keith O’Brien reported you saying”—she glanced at the notepad—“I told them that was dangerous.”

“Claudia wasn’t concerned,” I answered, lamely. “Anna was smoking in there.”

“But you knew better and stayed in an unsafe environment.”

“We were there to pack clothes for charity and just started fooling around.”

“Ms. Adler claims you were fighting with Ms. Nuñez, that the two of you had a history of a combative relationship. Have you wanted to harm Ms. Nuñez before?”

“No, of course not. And we didn’t have any, um, relationship. We just know each other through school.”

Turner’s dispassionate expression met my glance. “Can you clarify the sequence of events?”

I squeezed my eyes shut, willing the tears not to escape. And they didn’t. “We were just fooling around. I’m not used to, um, drinking.”

I heard my father's loud exhale.

Wrong thing to say.

"I'd never intentionally hurt Anna. Why would I do that?"

On the way home, my dad didn't grill me. As I predicted, his first concern wasn't my culpability or motivation or even the cost he would incur from the damages to the Nuñezes' garage and Anna's injuries. It was how we would present the information to my mother. To protect her or me or himself or all of us at once—he didn't say. What he did say was, "Let me talk to Mom first."

"Peri," he said into his cell, which was on speaker. "I'm with Ellie. I'm going to pick up Chinese. What do you guys want?"

"Fried dumplings," Josh chimed in.

"Steamed," my mother corrected him. "Why is Ellie with you?"

I sucked in air, waiting for his reply.

"It's a bit of a long story. Nothing to worry about."

My father dispatched the news over dinner in his best low-key voice. "Ellie acted foolishly, but so did the others."

My mom's fork clattered onto her plate, only ever half filled. "Anna is in the hospital, possibly injured. That's beyond foolish, Dan."

"Yes, of course, the outcome is—"

She interrupted him and focused on me. "What got into you, Ellie?"

I stared at my chicken with mushrooms and snow peas, the rice soaked in sauce. A moment before, I'd been gobbling the meal as if famished, as if I'd run track for miles instead of setting fire to a girl. I repeated the reason for my decision, but it rang hollow with my mother as judge.

"How could you insist on taking something that didn't belong to you?" she asked.

"You wouldn't understand."

"That's a cop-out. You'll have to do better."

"Peri," my dad said. "You should discuss this in private."

Josh elbowed the spoon in his soup bowl, so the liquid splashed, drops landing on the tablecloth. "I've already heard and I'm on Ellie's side. That girl lied to her."

"That's not the point," my mother said, reaching across the table to pat dry the tablecloth as if my brother were incapable of cleaning up after himself.

"Yeah, it is, Mom. Anyone would take it. Anna Nuñez sounds like a spoiled bitch."

"Watch your language, please."

"Thanks, Josh," I said softly, shifting toward him. His face was scrunched up, his forehead furrowed like my dad's.

At school the next day, girls jutted their shoulders forward and glared as they passed me in the halls. The popular boys arm-pumped and called me "Firestarter," as if I were a comic-book villain.

Overnight, I'd morphed from blissfully invisible to reviled pariah. Anna posted pictures of herself in the hospital, her hand bandaged, her face in profile. Her status: *Ellie Stone did this to me. Will need surgery and still never be the same.*

Her friends responded with sad and mad emojis, dozens of comments. *WTF? How? You're still beautiful. Who? Who is Ellie Stone? That girl should have stayed invisible! She'll be sorry!* A stack of OMGs.

Between second and third period, Nora texted me: *Don't pee until you get home.*

I couldn't hold it in. Sitting on the toilet, I read the graffiti. *Ellie*

Stone is an arsonist. She has to pay! Get that bitch locked up in juvie!

Working on it!

My breathing became wild.

I raced to the downstairs bathroom, then the one on the top floor. Someone had written that same message in all the girls' bathrooms throughout the building. Maybe more than one person. A campaign against me had formed. Someone scribbled that she overheard me say I wished Anna were dead. Another student claimed that she'd seen me throwing a cigarette into the bushes of the school, with a crazy look on my face!

At lunch, I unsealed my yogurt, watery whey on top. I'd thrown the container and an apple in a paper bag this morning, nabbing a ride with Nora's mom to make it to zero period. Nora had early gymnastics practice—which meant nothing for me to do for forty minutes—but all I wanted was to avoid the bus. I shoved the gross food across my tray.

"Everyone hates me," I said. "They are making all kinds of shit up about me."

Nora cracked her knuckle. "Maybe lay low for a while. You could, like, homeschool. You learn everything yourself, especially in Snider's class. You're basically self-taught in World History."

"My mom would never allow that. Anyway, I have bigger things to worry about, like going to jail."

"Kids don't go to jail, do they?" Nora looked even more like an anime character than usual: tiny features other than those round, shining eyes.

"They could take me to court, be tried as a delinquent," I told her. "Worst case, I could be put in juvie or some residential program."

Another knuckle crack. "The Nuñezes aren't going to press charges."

As if she had a clue about these people she'd never met. "I love you, Nor, but that's not how it works. The district attorney's office presses criminal charges if they think there's intent, not the victim." At my urging, my dad had laid out the facts. Unable to sleep last night, I'd joined him in the living room, after eleven, where he was reading in the dim lamp light. "You saw what Anna said, the pictures she posted. Claudia verified her story. It's their word against mine, two against one."

"What did your dad say about that?"

I'd written it down in the journal I kept for English class to refer to like a study guide. I read, "Normally, prosecutors don't press charges unless they think they can prove, beyond a reasonable doubt, that the person acted recklessly or deliberately."

"Which you didn't."

"No, but . . . I looked this part up. 'A person is guilty of aggravated arson, a crime of the second degree, if he purposely or knowingly places another person in danger of death or bodily injury.'"

"You'd never do that."

"Not purposely but *knowingly*. Which that police sergeant said. I should run away."

"You won't get into Harvard if you run away."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm never getting into Harvard."

"Why not? You're one of the smartest kids in our class."

"Like five percent of the people who apply get in. Anyway, I have a low emotional IQ." I tore the top of my pinky nail off, the one that had grown a ragged edge. "My mom thinks I need to see a shrink."

"For what? There's nothing wrong with you."

Just then, a gang of boys knocked into our table. Jake Thompson, six foot two with a chin like a knife, smacked my apple to the ground. He hissed, "Firestarter!"

About the Author



Photo credit: Jay Lindell

In addition to *Will End in Fire*, Nicole Bokar has published three novels: *Redeeming Eve* (2000), *What Matters Most* (2006), and *The Happiness Thief* (2021). *Redeeming Eve* was nominated for both the Hemingway Foundation/PEN award and the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize for Fiction. *The Happiness Thief* was a Foreword Indie Awards finalist. Kirkus wrote about *The Happiness Thief*, “Bokar is an evocative wordsmith . . . she has crafted a sympathetic heroine as her main character. . . . A compulsively readable mystery and character study.” She’s also the author of a book on novelist Margaret Drabble, and has written essays for several publications, including the *New York Times*, *Parents*, and *The Forward*. She lives in Montclair, New Jersey, with her husband and dog, Ruby, and has two adult sons.