

BURN OUR BODIES DOWN

THERE IS A STRANGER WITH MY FACE.

Ever since Margot was born, it's been just her and her mother. No answers to Margot's questions. No history to hold on to. Just the two of them, stuck in their run-down apartment, struggling to get along.

But that's not enough for Margot. She wants family. She wants a past. And when she finds a photograph pointing her to a town called Phalene, she leaves. But when Margot gets there, it's not what she bargained for.

Margot's mother left for a reason. But was it to hide her past? Or was it to protect Margot from what's still there?

Praise for *Burn Our Bodies Down*

"*Burn Our Bodies Down* is a masterpiece: an incredible and unnerving mystery that will creep up on you, twisty and labyrinthine, like the eerie cornfields of its setting" Holly Jackson, bestselling author of *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder*

"Gritty and strange . . . utterly compelling" *Booklist*, starred review

"A riveting, often frightening read" *Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"A deliriously creepy tale, the kind of slow-crawling horror that'll keep your nightmares up at night" Melissa Albert, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Hazel Wood*

"With this bloodcurdling blend of agriculture, advanced genetics, and interpersonal turmoil, Rory Power reminds us that seemingly disparate things in life can come together in horrifying ways" Nic Stone, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Dear Martin*

Praise for the *New York Times* bestselling *Wilder Girls*

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"Wholly original and compelling . . . Power's dark, lyrical tale challenges expectations at every turn; a paean to the power of female friendships" Fiona Noble, *Observer*

"Your new favourite book" *Cosmopolitan*

"[A] thrilling saga" *Entertainment Weekly*

"Gritty and lush . . . a staggering gut punch of a book" *Kirkus*, starred review

"Power's evocative, haunting, and occasionally gruesome debut will challenge readers to ignore its bewitching presence" *Booklist*, starred review

"The perfect kind of story for our current era" *Hypable*



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I was so proud not to feel my heart.

Waking means being angry.

—ELIZA GRISWOLD, "RUINS"

ONE

Flick and catch of the lighter, fire blooming between my fingers. It's too hot for this. Late June, sun close and watchful. Here I am anyway. Flame guttering in and out, in and out.

The candle I lit this morning is on the coffee table. Scented, cloves and pine—Mom stole it from work last year and we've been putting off using it, burning every other thing we can find. A bowl of tea lights, clean and bright, or a prayer candle she took from church. But we're running low, and this Christmas shit was the only one left in the box Mom keeps under her bed. Too sweet, too strong. But the rules are more important. They're always more important.

Keep a fire burning; a fire is what saves you. The first, the last, the heart of them all. She taught me that as soon as I was old enough to hold a lighter in my palm. Whispered it

to me in the dark. Pressed it against my forehead in place of a kiss. And I used to ask why, because it makes less than any sense at all. But you learn quick when you're Jo Nielsen's daughter. It's answers or her, and you'll only ever get one of them, so you'd better be careful deciding which it is.

I picked her. And even so, I don't get much of her most days.

With one hand, I test the breeze coming through the window I'm sitting at. It's barely anything, but I want to be sure it won't put the candle flame out. She pretends not to care about that anymore, says the lighting is the important thing—and it is, it is. She watches me do it every morning with this look on her face I'll never understand. But still. I remember the fight we had the first time she came home to a blackened, bare wick. I won't let that happen again if I can help it. Especially not these days, with Mom always in a mood, holding herself open like a trap.

I get up from the windowsill and slide to the floor, tilt my head into the shade. Floorboards sticking to my thighs, salt on my tongue every second. Above me I can see the smoke gathering, blue against the crackling ceiling. Nothing to worry about. Detectors disabled ages back. Mom ripped them down herself, paid the fire department to stop coming around. They turned off the electricity that month, but it was worth it. To her, anyway. And me, I went to school, and I came home, and I did my homework with a flashlight

between my teeth. Made a life for myself inside the mess of my mother's head, just like always.

I think I'd give anything to know what happened to leave her like this. As long as it's not waiting to happen to me.

The sun's dropped and left the room dim by the time I hear the station wagon rattle up outside. Mom back from her shift at the funeral home. She works at the front desk and takes all the calls, tells people if the coffin they picked is too short, helps them order enough whiskey for the wakes.

Footsteps on the stairs, but I don't stand up. My whole body languid and heavy, the humid air pinning me down. Mom can carry the groceries by herself.

She's a mess when she gets inside. Hair loose, sticking to her mouth, and a coffee stain on the lapel of her shirt. We look so alike that people are always calling us sisters, and not in a way that's flattery. The same somber mouth, the same streaks of gray at our temples. Mine came early, so early I don't remember what I looked like without them, and sometimes I catch Mom staring. Sometimes I catch her about to cry. I used to think maybe it was that I reminded her of my father—the man she never talks about, the man who must have given me something. But then I stopped thinking about him at all. Started wondering about where Mom came from instead. About who gave her the face that looks so much like mine.

"Hey," she says, squinting over the top of the grocery bag at me, and there's a smudge of something at the corner of her left eye, just above the scar there, spreading and raised and older than me. That's one thing we don't share, at least.

I peel my legs off the hardwood and hug my knees to my chest. We're having a good day so far. Both of us out of sight, both of us quiet—it's the talking that's gonna ruin it. "Hey," I say.

"You want to help me with this?"

She sets the groceries down on the rickety table by the door. I can see her checking the apartment. Everything the way she likes it, the candle burning strong in the center of the room, but her expression curdles anyway.

"You couldn't have closed the window?" she says. I don't answer as she crosses to it, her knee brushing my temple where I'm sitting on the floor. I can hear her rock the window in its frame, working it shut. It was only an inch. An inch, and if she were someone else's mother she wouldn't mind, wouldn't notice, wouldn't have these rules in the first place. But she's right. I should've closed it.

And still, it could be worse. She hooks her fingers through mine and pulls me to my feet. My stomach twists at her touch. We go for weeks without it, sometimes, her body flinching if I get within a yard or two.

"Help me," she says again, something nearly painful in

the strain of her smile. "You can stand in front of the fridge."

It's even hotter in the kitchen, and fruit flies we can't get rid of cover the fluorescent bulbs under the upper cabinets. Mom scrapes her hair off her face and starts unbuttoning her work shirt while I bring in the grocery bag. I can't see everything inside it, but what I can see isn't promising. She never learned how to grocery shop, and when it's just her she comes home with melba toast and cherry tomatoes, or seltzer and string cheese. Enough for both of us, if I'm lucky.

It's not that she forgets about me. I really don't think that's it. More like Mom usually has only enough energy to look after one person, and that person's always her.

It's easier when I'm in school. Lunch in the cafeteria, people who call themselves my friend as long as I'm right in front of them, and the lingering looks of the teachers who notice that I'm still wearing summer clothes deep into fall. I can pretend Mom's just like the other parents, pretend there's more for me than this apartment, than waiting for her to want me again.

Because she does, sometimes. Tucks me into her body and whispers, "Nobody but you and me." Good, because she's decided she loves me, and bad, because the hooks we've got in each other are too deep to ever come out, no matter how much we pull at them. But I don't care. Me, and Mom, and the whole world right here.

Today she's brought home a six-pack of seltzer and a bag

of baby bell peppers. I know what she'd say if I shopped like that—we have tap water at home, and produce is too expensive—but I've watched her in the grocery store, watched how she freezes, how the sight seems to drain from her eyes. I stay quiet, put everything in the fridge alongside the hot dogs and American cheese from her last trip.

“What should we make?” I ask. I'm picturing it, the two of us at the counter together, our dinner disgusting and oddly assembled, but ours.

That's my mistake. Maybe it wouldn't be one on a different day, but I see it happen in her. See her jaw tighten, her eyes narrow.

“Make?” she says.

I can save it. I can pull it back. “Yeah,” I say, grabbing the hot dogs from the fridge, ignoring the horrible slide of the liquid in the package. I have to show her I meant I'd do it for the both of us. That I don't expect anything more from her than what she's already given. “I could sauté the peppers, or—”

“If what I brought home isn't good enough,” Mom snaps, “you can go back out yourself.”

She pulls the car keys out of her pocket, tosses them down on the counter. I will myself into stillness. If I take the keys, the argument has started, and I won't be able to end it without getting into the driver's seat and weaving to the nearest gas station for a bag of pretzels. Mom's like that. So

am I—I learned it from her. Ride it until the end, no matter what.

“No,” I say carefully, “it’s fine.”

But she’s picking up steam. “Take some of my money, too, and just go get whatever you want.” She leans into me, pressing the keys against my chest, the metal cold and scratching. “Go on. If you don’t want to drive, you can walk.”

I knot my fingers together, squeezing tight to keep from snatching the keys and taking the bait. She’s feeling guilty. That’s why she’s picking a fight. But understanding that doesn’t make it feel any better.

“Really,” I say. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

That’s not what she wants from me. I know it’s not. But if I can get out of this without giving that to her, I will.

“Do you want me to make you a plate?” I try instead. I can end this fight. I can. I’ve done it before. “I’m not hungry.”

“Since when does it matter what I want?” Mom says, turning away from me and going to the sink, twisting the tap until water is pouring over her wrists, cooling her blood.

“It always does.” And fine, fine, if it gets us out of this stalemate, I will give up some ground. I will take another piece of blame—those pieces are the only things I can really call my own. “I’m sorry,” I say. “It was my fault.”

For a moment she doesn’t acknowledge that I’ve spoken.

And then she looks up, an emptiness in her eyes like I'm one of the bodies she sees at work. The water running over her paper skin, until I reach across her to turn it off.

She blinks. Reaches up to touch my cheek, brushing the spot on my skin where the scar sits on hers. Her palm is cold and wet, but all the same I can feel my face flushing, feel my eyes flutter shut.

She moves then, and there's a tug at my hairline. When she draws back, it's with a long gray hair pinched between her fingers. She went gray right at my age, later than I did, but I can't remember who told me that, and suddenly it's seeming like it couldn't have been her.

"Oh," I say, blinking back a moment of dizziness to watch as she winds the hair around her finger so tightly the skin turns red.

"What a shame," she says, almost to herself.

She leaves me to handle my own dinner and disappears into her room. Runs the bath all night, and at first I think she must be cooling down, but when I go in later to brush my teeth, the mirror is fogged and the taps are hot.

How to keep a fire burning. How to stitch a fight up until it's only a scar. That's the kind of thing you learn with a mother like mine. Mostly, though, you learn how to be loved without any proof. Seventeen years and I'm still getting that part wrong.