CATH HOWE



MY LIFE on FIRE





To all the good friends out there

C. H.

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Chapter 1
Ren



Houses don't burn down. That's wrong.

"I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house down," says the wolf in the story for little kids.

The truth is, houses burn *up*.

We saw the flames when we were sitting inside our car at the end of our road … leaping orange tongues of fire bigger than a firework display and crowds of people and fire engines.

We thought it was exciting.

But then, as we drove nearer, we all whispered, "*That's our house!*"

When we climbed out of the car, there was a

big cheer from our neighbours because they had thought we were trapped inside. Everyone rushed over and hugged us. We didn't die or anything. I wouldn't be telling this if we'd died.

No one knows for certain how the fire began that Sunday evening. Mum and Dad said it might be faulty electrics, but we might never know for sure. We had spent the evening at Mum's friend Lisa's house: me, Mum, Dad and my brother Petie. There we were, tucked up on the sofa eating pizza and watching films, and all that time my bedroom at home must have been flickering with orange light. That's how I picture it: flickering as the fire took hold.

By the time we drove back home and found the crowds and fire engines, our house must have been burning for at least two hours, one of the firemen said. The downstairs study had exploded with a bang everyone had heard down the street. That's when the people next door called the fire brigade. The Eltons stood in their coats, holding each other. Water was being sprayed on their bungalow too but it was just our house that was blazing because there was a garage in between our two houses.

Mum and Dad were pushed back. We all were.

We stood there gaping.

A fireman called, "Sorry, no one can go past the tape. Stay back until the area has been made safe!"

More firemen held on to hoses and huge jets of water spurted out into the building. Blue lights flashed, making it almost like day.

"We're so lucky," Mum said, holding me close. "Thank God we weren't inside."

"So lucky!" Dad echoed, holding Petie. "We're all OK. That's all that matters."

There was a feeling of rushing and shouts but somehow I was closed off, frozen, watching. My eyes had fixed themselves on our burning home. Those blooms of sudden light as things inside caught fire and blazed. Those burning bits that flew and fizzled. *Swishing … whishing …* Black smoke billowing out from downstairs. *Hiss, spit, crack,* making me gasp.

Worst of all, our house was already broken. I was looking up into my own bedroom but chopped in half as if someone had sliced it with a giant knife. I could see my bed and chest of drawers, my stool and fallen-over lamp. There were my kite curtains blowing, my otter picture tipping all wonky on the wall.

I turned and pushed my face into Dad's chest to not see. But I had seen.

We watched the fire devour our house like a monster.

Houses don't burn down. They burn up and up into the sky with huge flames that eat everything until there's nothing left.

Chapter 2
Ren



A woman in a dressing gown opened her front door. She bit her lip. "Two kiddies. It'll be a bit of a squish, I'm afraid, but it's all that's left."

"Thank you," Mum and Dad both said.

She pointed and we all followed her up the stairs. "There's two doubles," she said. "No noise after ten p.m. Shared bathroom. No cooking in the rooms. No guests. No clothes washing – take it to a launderette."

The bed blocked the door. Petie and me squeezed through and clambered on to it. Mum and Dad squashed in behind us. The windowpane looked

milky; you couldn't see out properly. Once you'd sat on the bed there wasn't anywhere else to go. There was a wardrobe with a door hanging open. Inside it was just a brown nothing. Dad skirted round the bed and pushed the wardrobe door shut. It made a crunching noise and fell open again.

I couldn't think properly. Petie and me sat on the bed holding carrier bags.

Mum and Dad said, "Stay there," and disappeared out into the corridor. We could hear them whispering. *We had to go somewhere… Not even clean.*

"It smells in here," Petie said.

He was right; it smelled of old things and smoke. But then I realised the smoky smell was coming from us: our clothes and hair. We were smoke people. Petie had a smudgy mark on his cheek. When I looked down, my trainers were spattered with black dust.

Petie nudged me. "Will there be breakfast, Ren?"

"I don't know." I felt lost, as if I'd wandered away from life. All that noise and the fire and the rushing people … and now just this gloomy room with a dim lamp flickering over our heads.

Petie swung his legs. "Will we have bacon and

eggs, Ren?"

"I said I don't know."

"If we were on a holiday, there would be a special breakfast."

By my side of the bed, the carpet had a dark stain.

"Waffles?"

I ignored him, staring at the stain.

Petie scrambled over and stared at it too. "Did the carpet get burned?"

I shrugged. I sat back on the bed. The wallpaper had a brown splodgy pattern. A dark-blue mark on the bottom of the wall looked like a speckled bruise. At home my bedroom walls had fluffy clouds shaped like the backs of sheep with a rainbow behind each one. When she came to say goodnight, Mum sometimes said to me, "Which cloud are you hiding in?" and I always said, "That one over there," choosing one. I loved my wallpaper. Mum and Dad always said I had my head in the clouds. I liked taking my mind somewhere else. Floating away. "You're a dreamer, Ren," they would say.

That's why I loved my collections inside my little painted cupboard with the glass doors. They were perfect for dreaming. All the shelves were crammed

with hand-picked animals, souvenirs and birthday presents. There were painted ornaments, shells, glass animals and birds. I liked to move them about and put different ones at the front. "How is the art exhibition?" Dad would say. When I was younger than Petie, I used to imagine my animal collections having their own life, calling to each other, "Quick, she's coming!" and dashing back into their places a split second before I checked them. Now, sitting in the smelly room, I felt waves of sadness crash over me. Our home. My bedroom and all those special things… Where were my collections now? A horrible twisting feeling gripped me inside and I started crying.

Petie nudged me again. "Will we stay up late?"

"I don't know. It's already late. Leave me alone."

"But will we?"

"I don't care about staying up!"

The door opened and Mum and Dad appeared. Mum pointed to my carrier bag. Mrs Collis had handed it to Mum while the firemen were rolling up the hoses. "For tonight," she said. "We'll get you some proper things tomorrow, love." The clothes in the bag were from Alice Collis, her daughter. She was thirteen. I dug around. Alice's pants. Pyjamas.

A blue jumper and a knitted hat.

My only clothes.

Dad must have seen I was crying. "Shush now," he said. He hugged me to him. "Come on, love. Tell you what, put your pyjamas on, then you can settle down."

Mum and Dad talked again quietly by the door. "It's very, very late. Dad and I are going to be just in the room next door," Mum said.

But Petie leapt up and stretched his arms out. "Cuddle!" he shouted.

"It's bedtime," Mum said.

"Cuddle!" he howled. He jumped into Mum's arms, sobbing.

"Shush," said Mum. She and Dad looked at each other.

The landlady's voice called up from downstairs, sharp and clear. "Try to be quiet, please. Some people are already asleep."

Mum sighed and said to Dad, "I'll have Petie. You sleep in here with Ren." She patted my head and kissed me. "Night-night." Then the door closed.

Dad stared out of the window. A long sigh came from him that was a groan too. He turned back to me and took the pyjamas out of the carrier bag.

"Come on, love, bedtime."

I got ready for bed. My movements seemed strange and slow. Dad stared out of the window, even though it was so dark you couldn't see a thing.

I put Alice's jumper on over the pyjamas. It was down to my knees but it made me warm. The sheets were scratchy.

Dad piled the coats on the floor so I could get in bed. He sat beside me and pushed his hair out of his eyes. "Try to sleep. I know you've got a lot of questions, Ren, love. We all have. We've had a big shock. Things will look better in the morning."

I kept noticing the weird smell. It was in my nose: sour roses mixed with smoky petrol.

Try to sleep.

The second I closed my eyes, flames jumped in front of them. My little animals, all my precious things, were flying out of my cupboard, like birds. I clutched and grabbed as they disappeared in smoke. The more I clutched handfuls to me, the more they kept dropping out and away and down into swirling dark.

My eyes jerked open. My breath came in little bursts.

I rolled over. Next to me, Dad lay curled up.

His breathing was a big sound in the room, low and rumbly. In the dim light I realised he was still wearing his shirt from today. He should have had Alice's pyjamas – they would have fitted him better than me.

I lay there and listened to his loud breathing. It helped. My eyes closed again.



Next thing I knew I was waking up and it was morning.

But Dad was wrong when he said everything would look better. Everything looked just as horrible as it had last night.

Our house had gone.

We had fallen off the edge of the world.