

Will End in Fire

A Novel

By
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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.