

First Day of 7th Grade

Thursday Peyton

"Eeeewww! Gross, what is that?" The pretty, popular girl is staring down at my desk in horror.

I look down, nervously, expecting to see a big gnarly spider or maybe some really nasty porno-graffiti. But there is nothing there, just the desk with the regular graffiti. I look back at the pretty popular girl and she is staring at me as if I just popped in from another planet.

"What?" I ask her.

Now other kids are staring too. She points toward the desk. I look down and slowly I realize that it's not the desk that she's pointing at but my right arm, which is resting on the desk.

Here we go again.

The Time I Was on Fire

It is early on a Sunday morning and my younger brothers are sitting at the breakfast bar watching me cook. First I will get the boys fed and then I will surprise Mom with breakfast in bed. I may be only nine but already I can cook. I've gotten pretty good at it since it has become one of my regular chores. The radio is on and

we are singing and laughing together in the sunny kitchen. Roderic, who is three and a half, is singing the parts he knows and making up the rest. Derric isn't even two yet but he's dancing and goofing around right along with us. They're pretty cool for little kids, which is why I don't really mind taking care of them, most of the time.

I turn to the stove and take the pan of scrambled eggs off of the big front burner and set them aside, covering them with a lid so they won't dry out. I know Mom will want her usual morning cup of Earl Grey tea so I fill the tea-kettle with water and put it on the smaller back burner to boil.

When I turn back to face the kids all I can see is Roderic's face contorted into a silent scream. I reach out to touch him, to ask what is wrong. He raises his arm and points at the same time that I see the flames. Flames, actual flames. On my arm. I am on fire.

I must have screamed because suddenly my mom is there. Panic in her eyes, grabbing me, pushing me over to the sink and turning on the water she douses the flames.

The kids sitting around my desk are all staring now. But now it's in a different way. I'm no longer a freak with a horrible scar but a girl with a bad-ass story to tell.

"So I spent about three months in the hospital and had a skin graft."

"Oh my God, three months!" The pretty popular girl says, "I'd go crazy locked up in a hospital room for that long"

"Well, it was actually two separate stays," I explain to them. "The first time was for about a month but then I got to go home for a while before I had to go back for the graft."

I think my mom must be psychic. Every morning, the moment I open my eyes, the phone on the little table next to my hospital bed rings and its Mom telling me she is on her way. Seriously, every morning, the minute I wake up.

Today is different. Instead of my mom's voice on the phone I hear my dad's voice in the hallway outside my room.

"Call her doctor. Get him in here so we can get this done."

I didn't even know he was back home again. This is the first time I have seen him since before I burned my arm. He called me a few days after it happened.

"You hangin' tough, Baby?"

"Yeah, I'm alright, Pops," I tell him knowing that it is what he expects to hear.

"That's my girl, you ain't no punk" He chuckles, sounding self-satisfied and proud.

He walks into the room taking up all the extra space. My dad, who we all call Poppi, is a big guy but that alone doesn't account for the

way his presence takes over a room.

"Hey Baby, get up and get your stuff together. I'm taking you home."

"But, Dr. Merhoff said I had to stay at least another week, maybe two."

"Your momma and your brothers want you home, so I'm here to take you home."

Dr. Merhoff steps into the room. "Mr. Crooks, I understand you want to discuss the possibility of discharging Thursday from the hospital. As I told her mother yesterday I don't think..."

"Look," Poppi interrupts the doctor, "her momma wants her home so just tell me what we have to do to make that happen."

They leave the room together. I begin to dress and pack my stuff because I know that people tend to do as they are told once Poppi takes charge of a situation. The rules that apply to the rest of the world are simply an annoying inconvenience that he usually manages to get around. Mostly through intimidation. So whether it's a good idea or not is beside the point; the decision has been made. Poppi will be taking me home today.

Twenty minutes later Poppi is back, grinning.

"Are you ready, Baby?"

"Yeah," I answer grinning back at him. "Does Mom know I'm coming?"

"Well, she sent me here on a mission, so what do you think?"

On the drive home he explains that there will be a nurse coming to the house every day and bunch of other stuff that he had to arrange before the doctor would agree to discharge me.

I wasn't really listening I was just glad to be free.

When we walk into the house Mom jumps up and hugs me hard. My brothers come in from the other room and for a moment they are completely shocked but then they both come running at me screaming "Sissy!" and I know I am really home.

The kids around my desk in the classroom are all paying attention to the conversation now. After several years of this I can predict most of the questions that will be coming. It used to bother me when people would stare or just walk up and ask what happened to me but now I don't mind telling this story. After all, it's easier than explaining my name. A few repetitive questions and a visible scar are a small price to pay for retaining the use of my arm and hand.

I hear the usual array of questions: Did it hurt, do I have feeling in the scar, Am I going to have surgery to remove the scar, what's a skin graft etc...

"You have physical therapy today, hon." The nurse tells me with a sympathetic smile.

The nurse is one of the regular day shift nurses so she knows what physical therapy is like for me. It hurts and I hate it. But I have no choice but to tough it out. The doctors have already told my mom that I will probably "retain minimal functionality" of my arm and hand.

"That's bullshit. My daughter is going to be fine and don't you dare tell her any different." Mom doesn't really live by the same rules

as the rest of the world either. But she is more subtle about it than Poppi. Mom simply sets expectations. High expectations. For everyone. When those expectations are not met there will be consequences.

When my teacher brings my weekly homework packet, the nurses encourage me to practice writing with my left hand but I refuse. Instead I have figured out a way to manipulate the bandage that winds around my fingers in a way that helps me hold the pencil so that I can continue to use my right hand. The nurses allow this because Mom has banned them all from mentioning the possibility that I will lose the use of my arm.

Of course, I wasn't supposed to know any of this but hospital wards are small places and nurses talk. A lot. I knew what was wrong with every patient in my section of the pediatric ward. The majority of the patients could be divided into two categories: the short timers and the long timers. Most of the short timers were there for a day or two with appendicitis or tonsillitis while the long timers were usually those with broken bones in traction from skiing accidents. I was the big exception since I was both a long timer and mobile. I was the self-appointed welcome committee for new patients, I visited all of the kids in the ward daily and I hung around the nurse's station as much as they would let me.

The nurse returns with a wheelchair to take me down to physical therapy. A quick elevator ride and a couple of turns down the hall and we are there. My first stop is the tub. The therapist asks me if I'm ready and I take a deep

breath, smile and tell her I am. She removes my bandages, tests the water temperature and tells me to go ahead whenever I am ready. In my head I hear my dad saying, "My girl ain't no punk." I grit my teeth, squeeze my left hand into a fist and slowly ease my right arm into the hot soapy water. The pain is indescribable. The arm I have just submerged into hot, bubbling water full of mysterious, medicinal, soapy chemicals is covered, elbow to fingers, in third degree burns. This part of the healing process is complicated because while there is some healing and new skin growth there is also necrotic tissue that must be removed to promote healing and prepare for the surgery that will be the next step.

After twenty minutes in the tub I remove my arm from the water and the really fun part begins. The therapist hands me a stiff brush and I begin the slow painful process of scraping the brush across the wound over and over again, in order to remove the dead tissue. The therapist allows me to do this myself so that I have some control over the pain level and I am grateful.

They are all waiting for the answers to their questions.

Yes, it hurt.

Yes, I have feeling where the scar is.

No, I didn't lose any significant function.

No, I'm not going to have any more surgery on my arm.

"Why not? I mean, why would you live with that scar?" asks the pretty popular girl with a look of disgust.

"Because I earned it."

She looks at me in complete bewilderment.

The cute popular guy sitting behind the pretty popular girl smiles and says, "So what is a skin graft, anyway?"

I give him the short version "They remove skin from another part of the body and attach it to the burned area to help it heal."

I used to dread the next question.

"Whoa, cool. Where did they take the skin from?" the cute popular guy asks.

I could lie, but I don't. "My butt. And no, it didn't leave a scar."

This shocks them all silent for a moment before the whole group bursts into laughter.