

Chapter One

School....yuck! School was not always yuck. Until recently, Rome had liked school, but today seemed unbearably slow. He wasn't sure what had changed. It could be the anticipation of summer, but he doubted that. He had an unnerving fear that the something that had changed was him. He felt uneasy just sitting still. He needed to move; to physically release the burning need for action. Was this one of the changes Coach had described in that "special" Health Class he had last semester? If so, he seemed to be the only one going through it. Rome looked around the class. Most of the kids were paying attention to the teacher. Those who weren't looked entangled in a waking sleep: eyes opened, brains closed.

He started to fidget. "Control," he thought. "Keep it under control." His go-to mantra that had worked for years when he was experiencing his bouts of twitching was less and less effective these days.

What was happening to him couldn't be normal, could it? If it wasn't, what could he do? What he needed was someone to talk to about this. None of his friends were close enough for that. He needed to find some way to release this energy, and it had to be tonight. He couldn't wait any longer. Now he just had to figure out what to do. It was at that precise moment that an idea formulated in his head. It was an idea that seemed to mirror the burning inside. Tonight! He would rectify this tonight.

When the day finally ended, Rome rushed home. He called greetings to his mother and flew up the stairs to his bedroom. Rome began a systematic rummaging of the room. He knew what he was looking for, but couldn't remember where he had hid the contraband fireworks from last 4th of July. After several, stress-filled minutes of searching, Rome found the package of Black Cat firecrackers under several pairs of blue and black socks in his bottom drawer. What would the evening hold? What would he feel like when he was done? What was wrong with him?

"Sometimes I have just got to add a touch of wicked excitement to my humdrum existence," Rome said to himself. He didn't always talk to himself, but lately he had been thinking more and speaking less. Realizing that nobody can hear what is in your head is a marvelous thing about growing up. All the inane, rambling thoughts of a thirteen year old who is bored out of his wits living in a small town in Georgia may sound a bit fanciful or maybe completely fanatical. Now, all he had to do was wait for dinner.

After dinner, Rome made up an excuse about getting help with homework, and he left the house promising to be home by nine o' clock. He hated deceiving his mother, but this little white lie could not possibly hurt anyone. Tomorrow he would ask Clay to cover for him, if the question ever arose.

"I mean, it's not like I'm going to blow up the whole neighborhood," he reminded himself, as he slipped around to the back of the house away from prying eyes. Immediately, he was struck by a question. Was he trying to bolster his courage to strike, or was he trying to convince himself that there was a valid reason for this act of lunacy? He intended to light up the night with some ear-blasting, neighborhood-shaking, friendly fire. Of course, intent rarely ever equates to outcome.

This was it; his first, but probably not his last act of rebellion. He knew that consequences would be swift and excruciating if he got caught. He did not care. He just had to DO something. There was an unexplainable need to push the limits of his parents' control, yet he did not know why. This insane need

to commit an act of insurgence felt right. This uncontrollable feeling had begun building up inside of his head weeks ago, and no amount of fidgeting or twitching could release the tension. The need to rebel kept growing like a flower blooming. No, that comparison was too sweet to describe the way he felt. The feeling was more like a snake shedding its skin. He felt all trapped in a life too small and needed to break out. Yeah, that was more like it. He had an insatiable need to be free. Free of what, not a clue.

At first, he tried to be cool with his pyrotechnics. He struck the match against the sole of his left Puma just like all the action heroes did. He quickly realized this was not going to work. Matches needed something abrasive to ignite the sulfur, not rubber. He decided to try it against something with a little more grit. The pavement would provide the perfect amount of both resistance and friction to light the match.

Of course, after two or three tries, the match snapped in half, and Rome briefly thought about giving up on his tour de force. "Am I so bored that even a burned finger is worth it?" He paused in mid-thought. "Most definitely, yes," he concluded. Abruptly, he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. The match head seemed to be moving in his fingers. It appeared to be changing into individual pixels right before his eyes. The pixels moved like a television that had lost its signal. They bounced back and forth excitedly yet remained contained on the bulbous red tip of the match. He shook his head and blinked his eyes trying to right his vision, but the pixels still jumped around the match head.

"What in the world is that all about?" Rome asked himself as he brought the match closer to his face for a more intense inspection. "Am I hallucinating?" he thought. He squinted one more time to try to bring his vision back in line, when he felt his eyes tearing up with warmth. In a split second, that warmth turned to heat. Then, it turned into extreme heat. Rome felt the skin on his cheeks heating up, and he smelled hair burning. His head was on fire! No! Not his head. His eyes were on fire!

He cupped his hands over both of his eyes and threw himself to the ground. His mind raced. He reached out and found a small watering can his mother kept around to water her flowering plants in the nearby gardens. In a panic, he began fervently splashing handfuls of water into his eyes. As the burn intensified, he frantically pelted his face with any liquid he could find in a desperate attempt to put out the fire.

The heat ended as suddenly as it came. Rome stopped thrashing around. He pulled his hands away from his eyes and stared into the puddle he had created on the ground. He half expected his eyes to be burned to a crisp. Miraculously, they were unharmed. He blinked three or four times and realized his vision was okay. He feverishly patted down his cheeks and traced the curves of his face, but everything seemed to be intact. That's when he had a crazy realization.

"I am not hurt!" he exclaimed. "I am not burned or anything! There is no pain!" Try as he could, he didn't remember feeling any pain at all. What about his hair? He had surely smelled burning hair if only for a brief second. He again, glanced down at his reflection in the water. "My hair is perfectly fine!" he cried out.

Rome stood up to better assess what had just happened. He touched his clothes. All okay. His mom would be happy about that. He looked around the area. Everything seemed normal. Then, he noticed the half matchstick he had been holding when the event happened. It was there on the ground

about five feet behind him, and the head was obsidian black. In fact, the whole match was burnt to a crisp.

Suddenly, the heat started again. This time it wasn't on his face. It was at his back. He whirled around and could not believe his eyes. A large standing crape myrtle belonging to his neighbor Mrs. Baskins was engulfed in red-orange flames shooting up to as high as the streetlight. Self-preservation took hold, and Rome ducked into a darkened area of his yard. He stood back a good twenty feet from the burning tree, but could still feel the licks of heat pouring off of it.

"Oh, horse-apples," he muttered louder than he meant to. "I am in some serious trouble." And with that, he ran as fast as he could around the house and into his living room. "Mom!" he shouted. "Mrs. Baskins' yard....there's a tree....uh....Mom, call the fire station now!" He sounded panicked. Rome was never panicked. He was usually cool, collected, and very deliberate with his thoughts and actions. Something was different this time. Something strange had happened to him out there that he could not explain. He was freaked out!

Within minutes, he heard the fire engine wail. He stood by the front window watching the firefighters douse what was left of the tree with fire retardant chemicals. Luckily, the fire had not spilled onto the neighbor's yard. That was because Mrs. Baskins was a meticulous gardener and made sure her grass was healthy, green, and watered all year round. It was something for which Rome would forever be in her debt. But the myrtle had been vibrant and healthy also. How had something so alive been enflamed so quickly by a tiny match?

Rome reached into his pocket and felt for the fireworks. They were still there, unused. They could not have been the reason for the combustion. Then, he remembered the panic and crazy heat he had felt in his eyes. He couldn't remember any pain though. That wasn't the strangest part to him. He began to believe that maybe HE had started that inferno. Maybe HE had burned through the match and caught the tree on fire. Something strange had happened to him out there for sure. What he wanted now was to know where the fire came from. His head swam. There was no doubt. His mind was fanatical not fanciful. And the ever-present urge to shed his skin still pulled at him.

It had been such a long day at school. And it was shaping up to be an even longer night. The days really drag on where he lived, and soon he would find how unbelievably exciting those days could be.