**GOOD VS. EVIL HIGH**

CHAPTER ONE

*~FIRE~*

I woke up to an earsplitting *beep, beep, beep*. I sat up in bed, recognizing the pungent smell of smoke. Girls all over Room Fifteen, numbered for our age, in The Broken Ridge Home for Girls sat up in the long row of beds on either side of me.

“What’s going on?” Samantha asked sleepily from my left.

 “Fire!” I jumped out of bed and ran to the first of two girls I knew could sleep through almost anything. “Get everyone out!” I started shaking Rachel, our newest girl and heaviest sleeper. She was rubbing her eyes groggily.

Someone screamed. I looked in the direction it had come from and saw Samantha standing in front of the door, holding her hand. She looked at me and said, “The door’s blazing hot,” before she pulled her sock off and put it on her hand.

“Wait,” I said. “The fire could be right outside our room. Tie sheets together and hang them out the window.” We were on the top floor, but luckily, we were in a two-story building.

“Come on, Rachel. Get up.”

Rachel finally opened her eyes a crack. “What’re you doing?” She was getting there, but still not awake enough to understand the seriousness of what was happening.

Even though I was afraid she’d punch me for it, I grabbed her shoulders and pulled her into sitting position. “The house is on fire! Get up!” She stared at me as if she might seriously hit me, but I didn’t give her time. I let her go and looked four beds over at Tawny, world’s heaviest sleeper number two. She was stumbling away from her mattress with her eyes nearly closed.

The window scraped open noisily and I was immediately hit by the cold October air. “Kristine, the screen!” Samantha said.

“Rip it out,” I answered. I went to help her tie the sheets to the cold bars at the end of the bed that had been dragged to the window. I waited patiently for every girl in the room to get out  before I did, the room filling with smoke the entire time.

I felt a great deal of relief knowing every girl in that room was safe. But as I climbed out of the window and looked in both directions, I realized everyone else was still in danger. So many precious lives filled that orphanage and no one else was climbing out of the windows. Hopefully they’d all gotten out of their rooms okay and were running down the stairs to safety.

Only a couple of girls were there when my feet hit the ground. The rest had probably gone around front.

I could already see the flickering light of fire inside most of the lower level windows to my right. The smoke alarm on our corner of the building must have gone off later than the rest. “Knock on all the windows and throw whatever you can find at the ones upstairs. Try to get everyone out who’s still in there,” I said before I ran around front. When I got there, tall flames were pouring out of windows and washing over the red bricks, turning them black.

For a minute I simply stared, remembering the cold winter nights, inadequate meals, and harsh treatment we’d all endured since the day I’d arrived in that worthless place three years before. The birthdays and holidays always forgotten. The nightmares it produced in many of us. It almost felt good to watch it all ablaze, except for the lives it was putting at risk.

I forced myself to turn my attention to the crowd of girls gathered out front as I searched their faces for Ms. Wendy’s. The only adult I saw was her assistant standing in the middle of several desperate girls who were all asking questions and crying. So I ran toward her. “Ms. Wendy’s gone for help,” she was saying. “I don’t know what happened. And there’s nothing I can do. So calm down and shut up!” But the girls’ hysterical questions continued.

Looking through the terrified faces, I realized the youngest ones were absent. We had girls as young as five living there. Ms. Mary. She’s the one in charge of five and six year olds. She was just as cold-hearted as the rest of the women who took care of us, but at least she would be able to tell me if they’d gotten out all right. Where’s Ms. Mary?” I screamed, running around in front of everyone. They acted as if I wasn’t even there. Ms. Mary was little enough it was hard to spot her.

But I caught a glimpse of her behind a few of the Room Thirteen girls. “Where’re the little ones?” I asked, running toward her.

“I don’t know.”

“You left them in there?”

“I had to get myself out.”

Enraged, and not at all surprised by her neglect, I took off toward the right side of the building. Why did no one else care? *Could one of the orphanage ladies actually be hateful enough to have started the fire?* I wondered as I ran to Room Eight’s window first.

We were taught never to climb out the window or we would suffer serious consequences. If they were unable to leave through their door, the girls inside might’ve been too scared to use the window.

I started pounding my fist on the window before I got a good look inside. And just as I’d expected, they were all huddled in the corner beside the window, coughing, crying, and hugging each other. Flames were moving up the door on the other side of the room. They all turned to me.

“Open the window!” I shouted. Lucy, the girl nearest me, reached up with shaking hands and unlocked the window. “You’ve got to get out of there. Come on.” I held out a hand and helped Lucy climb out. “I’ve got to go. Make sure everyone gets out. Don’t leave anyone behind.”

“Don’t leave us alone,” Lucy called. Even though my heart hurt at the fear in her voice, I had to keep going.

I went to the Room Seven window and did the same thing.

And then Room Six. The flames hadn’t quite reached them, but dark smoke already filled the air. I instructed the children to open the window, but only one girl could reach it, and she couldn’t seem to get the lock undone.

I ran around the side to see if anyone was out back. The yard was deserted. So I picked up one of the heavy rocks lining the outside of our building and raced back to the window. “Stand back.” I reached back and threw it against the window, shattering it completely. Then I climbed in and kicked as much glass out of the way as I could before I helped the girls climb through the window so they wouldn’t cut themselves.

The smoke hit me the second I stepped in, but I pulled my shirt up over my nose and kept going.

Room Five was in the center, I remembered, the worst room in the building because it was the smallest and the only one without windows. The thought made me sick. But it was right next to the one I was in. If I could get to them through the hallway they might be okay.

By the time I got the last Room Six girl out, I was coughing and feeling a little dizzy. The air was so thick with smoke. Still, I ran to the door and reached out for it.

It was hot, but I had to get to the smallest girls. Leaving them to burn wasn’t an option, no matter what it took to get them out. I yanked a blanket off a bed and wrapped it around the doorknob so I could turn it. Fire was burning the walls across the hall from me. It suddenly hit me that the house could cave in at any moment.

Even though the heat stung and the smoke burned my eyes and throat, I raced to Room Five and wrapped my hand around the burning doorknob. Why hadn’t I brought the blanket with me? No time. My hand burned and blistered. Inside that room I found nine terrified little girls crouching against the wall beside the door.

They all screamed when they saw me, and I opened my mouth to tell them to follow me, but I began to throw up instead. My throat felt as if it was on fire between the heavy black smoke and the acid my stomach was now producing.

“Ok…” I couldn’t stop coughing. I couldn’t even think straight. “…I…I need you to come with me.” They didn’t move. As pain began spreading throughout my body, I moved to the girls and grabbed two of them by the arms. “Come on.” I began pulling them through the door, forcing them to step in my vomit along the way. The rest of them followed, and we were running to Room Six and then to the window.

I helped each of the girls out before I realized one wasn’t there. “Who’s missing?” I asked the last one as she climbed out.

“Annicka’s under the bed,” the little girl said.

*No!* I leaned out the window to take in a deep breath of clean air and ran back into the hallway, feeling extremely lightheaded now.

“Annicka,” I called out in Room Five. No response. “*Annicka*!” Nothing. I lay down and moved around against the floor, looking under every bed.

My eyes were getting heavy. By the time I got to the fifth bed, I could barely keep them open. As everything began getting hazy, I saw a hand under one of the beds up ahead. It seemed so far away. And I needed to sleep, but I had to help that little girl. Sirens echoed inside my head. I couldn’t stay awake much longer.

Using the last bit of strength I possessed and my final driving thought, *…must…help…her….*I dragged myself to the seventh bed and reached out to hold that tiny hand. It was the only way they would find her. They would see me and follow my arm to hers. She would be saved…if anyone found us…she would be saved…