

After surviving an explosion, Kilee Brookbank, 18, began her journey to recovery—and shares the important lesson she learned along the way.

I was so glad to be home from school—it had been a really, really awful day. But when I walked into the house, I smelled something gross. My stepbrother was probably to blame, I thought, so after 30 minutes of dealing with the nasty stench, I grabbed a lighter from the kitchen and walked into the bathroom to light a cinnamon-mocha scented candle.

I rolled the silver spark wheel and pushed down on the red button. Click. And then...BOOM. A flash of overwhelming heat hit me and I was

instantly enveloped by raging flames. But it didn't feel like I was burning. It felt like when you open the oven door and the heat hits your face—it didn't hurt, it was just so hot.

I flew a few feet backward and hit my head on the toilet, knocking myself unconscious. Moments later I woke up, confused, to the sound of my dog, Digger, barking at me.

I didn't understand what was happening, but my instincts told me to run. And run *fast*. As I stumbled out of the house, through shattered glass and splintered doors—Digger by my side the entire time—there was another violent blast: the realization that I was on fire.

In a single moment on Nov. 10, 2014, my life changed forever. The explo-

sion (which we eventually learned was caused by a gas leak) destroyed my home. It burned 45 percent of my body. The damage was all over—my face, my chest, my arms, my legs—but my hands were hurt the worst.

And it sent me to Shriners Hospitals for Children in Cincinnati where I spent 38 days recovering from second- and third-degree burns that required multiple surgeries, skin grafts and physical therapy that kept me in constant, excruciating pain.

But don't call me a burn victim—I'm a burn survivor. And it's what I've done with that moment, and every moment after, that defines me.

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The Strength In My Scars

A VERY BAD DAY

On the morning of the accident, I woke up at 6:30 a.m. but didn't get out of bed until 10 minutes later when my mom finally made me. I brushed my teeth, picked out my clothes: a T-shirt, black leggings, black Uggs and a leather bracelet with my name, "KILEE," embroidered on it. I put on makeup. Straightened my hair. Pulled it into a ponytail and popped on a headband.

Back then, I was a normal 16-year-old. My town is tiny—there's fewer than 5,000 people who live here—and everyone knows everyone else. My biggest worries were boys, friends, school.

That morning, my Spanish teacher announced a surprise vocab test I wasn't prepared for, and I couldn't even finish it. I got so upset that I went to the bathroom and cried. When the day finally ended, I stormed out of school.

At home, I was so happy my new iPhone had finally been delivered after a month of waiting. But when I opened the box, I saw the screen was broken—and I was furious. Texting with a friend, I vented about how annoyed I was. "There are more important things to worry about," he finally wrote.

I decided to go do something about that disgusting smell.

THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

In the moments and hours after the explosion, it was pure terror and confusion. My neighbors called 911 and ripped the clothes off my body, patting down the flames with their own bare hands.

My family heard the ambulances and firetrucks rushing to our house before they even knew about the blast. There was a time when they didn't know whether I'd survive the initial surgeries—or the infections that could occur afterward.

The hardest part came when I was finally out of the woods: the recovery. I had to relearn everything—how to use the bathroom, how to feed myself.

While most teens use their fingers to text 20 friends simultaneously, I struggled to pick up toothpicks from a table and put them into a small square of white Styrofoam. It was frustrating and painful.

But there came a moment when I realized that if I was ever going to get better, if I was ever going to regain the full use of my hands and body again, I had to fight. I had to do it myself. And I did.

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

After 38 days in the hospital, coming "home" was a big adjustment.

The house we had lived in was completely destroyed, so we stayed in a rental across the street. My parents had to bathe me. I wore special compression garments at all times. My mom would help me open a tube of toothpaste or swipe on mascara—things my fingers were still relearning how to do.

In the hallways at school, people would stare at me, but I knew they were just curious. It was weird to realize that everyone else could just sit, relax, write with a pen in school—while I was squeezing stress balls because I couldn't use my hands the way they could.

It was a tough year. But I was tougher.

RISING ABOVE

In the hospital, I had a nurse who would tell me, "This is temporary. This is all temporary." Those words stuck with me...and she was right.

On the first day of my senior year, I woke up, ate breakfast and got dressed—all by myself. Over the next 10 months, I caught up on all my schoolwork, danced

at prom in a dress that made me feel beautiful and walked across the graduation stage with all my friends. Now, I'm a freshman at Xavier University in Cincinnati and dedicate much of my free time to fundraising for Shriners—I owe them my life.

Nothing will ever be the same for me. But this journey taught me how to understand myself and let go of the things that don't matter. Because I didn't just survive—I learned to lead a life worth living every single day. I learned how powerful it can be to receive love and support from others. And now, no matter how terrible my day might seem, I look at my beautiful scars and know it's never really that bad. 🌟



Kilee Brookbank is an honor student, animal lover, author and burn survivor. In 2015, she co-founded the Kilee Gives Back Foundation to support other families in crisis. Kilee and her mother wrote the book *Beautiful Scars* (KiCam Projects, \$19) to tell their story; a portion of proceeds benefits Shriners Hospitals.