

*This book is dedicated to the people who save  
lives, especially those at Shriners Hospitals for  
Children—Cincinnati: the doctors, nurses, and  
volunteers who  
make it such a special place.*

*This book is also dedicated to everyone  
going through life-changing setbacks  
or challenges.*

*There is hope.*

*You can heal.*

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# CHAPTER ONE

## Change

*Kilee:*

The whole thing happened so fast that it didn't seem real.

I walked past the bathroom and got a whiff of the odor again. It was terrible—really terrible. It was nasty, and I didn't want to sit in the house with it smelling like that. It was gross.

The smell had permeated the living room. It was about 4:20 PM, and after a half hour of that stench, I'd had enough.

I walked into the kitchen and slid open the drawer, fumbling around until I found a lighter. I was on a mission. I glanced over to see that the dogs were on the couch as I walked into the bathroom and snatched the cinnamon mocha-scented candle.

It was almost out of wax because we had used it so often. It was so low that I had to stick my entire hand inside the glass jar, meeting the top of the wick with the lighter. With a steady thumb, I rolled down the silver spark wheel and pushed down the red button on the lighter, igniting a small flame on the candlewick. Click.

BOOM!

A flash of overwhelming heat hit me. I was enveloped by raging flames.

It was intensely hot on my face.

The scorching flash blasted my face and blew me to the ground without warning. 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 hot.

I flew backward and hit my head on the toilet.

I woke up, confused, to the sound of my dog, Digger, barking at me. Just a few minutes before, it seemed, I had been thinking about taking a nap; at first I thought maybe it was all a dream.

Is this really happening?

When I realized it wasn't a dream, my instincts told me to run.

Run fast.

I stumbled outside and looked around. Digger was still with me, but I was disoriented. I wasn't sure what was happening or if any of it was real.

My head was throbbing, and I was hot—super hot. The next realization was a second violent blast: I was on fire.

My life changed on November 10, 2014.

It's what I've done with that moment, and every moment after, that defines me today. Nothing was going to kill my spirit.

Back then, I was a normal sixteen-year-old girl. We live in Georgetown, in rural Ohio. There are just under five thousand people in Georgetown. Most have lived there their entire lives, many for generations. Everyone knows everyone else and news travels fast. My days were typical for a teenager in small-town America. I worried about my friends and school. I was always caught up in the drama at school and sometimes at home. But things changed for me in the blink of an eye. Over the next year, I struggled to become myself again. In the process, I realized that I'm not the person I once was—or thought I was. I'm stronger.

I learned that my journey was about understanding myself and not worrying about things that don't matter. Now, no matter how bad my day is, I look at my beautiful scars and know it's never really that bad. Not only did I survive, but I live my life better than ever, helping others and making life worth living every single day.

After that day, nothing has ever been the same for me and for those around me. But I came to understand that might be OK.

## Monday Blues

My day started like any other grueling Monday, getting up way too early and dragging myself out of my comfortable, warm bed to get ready for school.

I was sixteen and definitely not a morning person.

Begrudgingly, I woke up at 6:30, but I still didn't get up and get ready. My mom made me get out of bed about ten minutes later. I went to the bathroom and brushed my teeth

and then went back to my room, lay down, and went back to sleep.

I woke up on my own about fifteen minutes later.

After picking out my clothes—a chore that took forever because I never knew what I wanted to wear—I got dressed. I wore my teal blue sparkly “Talk DECA to me” T-shirt (DECA is a school club for students and professionals in finance and marketing), black leggings, and black Uggs. Then I wrapped around my wrist a brown leather bracelet with “KILLEE” embroidered on it.

I straightened my long chestnut hair, whipped it up into a ponytail, and slid a headband over my forehead, pushing my bangs back out of my face. I applied some light makeup.

Lacking any enthusiasm, I slid into my red Corolla and started the fifteen-mile trek to Ripley-Union-Lewis-Huntington High School in Ripley, Ohio. I dreaded going inside. I sat in my car until the very last minute.

My first class was Spanish. Mondays are never great, but this made it awful. And wouldn't you know it? I sat down only to hear, “You have a test on vocabulary words...” A what?

It got ugly. Everyone thought the test was unfair, and my teacher thought no one was prepared. It seemed like the worst test ever. I wrote down maybe one word and then even tried to copy off the person next to me, who didn't know the words either. I told my teacher, “I don't know what you want me to do about it, but here it is. I'm not finishing it, because I can't finish it. I just don't understand the words you're saying.” I sat back down.

I was so mad that I started crying, which is very unlike me. I left all my stuff and rushed to the bathroom. After I

cooled off for a minute, I walked back to the classroom and threw my stuff into my book bag.

At this point, a concerned teacher had already asked me if I was OK. When I finally went back to my classroom, five girlfriends and some of my guy friends were making sure I was OK. I told them I was fine; I just didn't want to talk to anyone. As soon as the bell rang, I stormed out.

The rest of the day I was just mad. Really, really mad.

My last class of the day was one of the few things I liked about school. It was my pottery class.

Pottery was the best, because I could use my creativity to make whatever I wanted. The previous week I had created a mug, and it was finally finished firing in the kiln. I loved painting my pottery because I could finally make it look the way I wanted.

I chose pretty shades of pink, blue, and purple. With a paintbrush in my hand, I swiped the mug, making it beautiful, one stroke at a time. By the end of the class, my hands were covered in brightly colored paint, but I didn't care. I loved my mug.

## Homebound

It wasn't too long after the end of soccer season, and I was just getting used to not having practice or games after school. I could just go home and do homework or sit on the couch and watch TV. And that's what I was going to do—especially after the day I'd had.

But first, food!

On my way home, I decided to stop at McDonald's, because lunch hadn't been great. I thought school lunches were gross, so I'd only had a bag of Doritos and a Gatorade. I hit the drive-thru and ordered a plain McChicken, medium fries, and a large Sprite.

I got home at 3:45 PM. As soon as I walked in, I smelled something strange...like poop. I saw food containers from the previous night's dinner and figured my stepbrother had come home, eaten, and done something to stink up the bathroom.

I kicked off my boots and headed to the bathroom; the smell was definitely stronger in there. We keep our dogs, Doogie and Digger, in the bathroom during the day. They are tiny Chihuahua-Yorkshire terrier mixes and can really do a lot of damage if left to roam the house alone. I let them outside and packed up my phone charger and shoes while waiting for my brother, Cameron, to get done with basketball practice. We were leaving at six to go to our dad's house for the week.

Not long before four o'clock, my mom called me and we talked briefly. I asked her where Cameron was—normally, he would have been home already. She told me he was staying at school until basketball practice, and I told her I would pick him up on my way to our dad's house later that evening.

She told me she would be home at 4:30. I said, "OK. I love you," and hung up.

I got off the couch to let the dogs back in, but when I walked past the bathroom, the smell was even stronger.

Ignoring it, I started texting with my friend. My thumbs could type hundreds of letters a second, I'm sure. I was complaining to him about my bum phone. Again.



The iPhone 6 had just come out. Excited to be able to get one, I'd ordered it four weeks earlier, but I hadn't known it was going to take a month to get to me. I was mad.

When it had finally arrived, I started opening the package and heard a noise from inside the box. I opened it up and the screen was popped off the phone. I had waited so long for it! Now I'd have to send it back and wait some more. Ugh!

I could tell my text-ranting about the phone was annoying my friend. I was complaining. A lot.

I texted him, "I still can't believe that..."

"Yeah, me either, but it doesn't matter," he texted back.

"Yes it does. I waited so long for it and that's what they give me?"

"It'll be OK."

I just kept going on and on about it.

Finally, he texted, "There are more important things to worry about."



***Lori:***

My morning was like any other. I got the kids up at 6:30, and since Kilee struggles in the morning, I had to go in and wake her up again...and again. I sat her up on the bed and she slowly woke up every time. I drove Cameron to school, and Kilee waited for me, as always, to get back. She knew I

liked saying good-bye and “I love you” every morning before she left.

I then headed to the office, which was in town and just five minutes from the house. I spend most of my time managing programs that help adults in addiction and recovery. I had a meeting at eleven with our clinical director. We talked about work, but also on a personal level about Cameron and sports. My son always strives to be better. Our clinical director referees games, and he was talking to me about how Cameron was big for thirteen and seemed to have great potential. We had lunch together and he left the office around 2:30.

Cameron had texted me, asking if his friend could go to the house with him. I said, “I don’t care, buddy.”

“OK, I’ll text you and let you know what we’re doing for sure.”

He texted me back about a half hour later and said they were just going to stay at school for practice.

“All right, buddy, that’s fine. Just text me when you walk over to the gym.”

His practice was at the elementary school, which is behind the junior-senior high school. I knew he was safe and with his friends. I told him to make use of his time and do his homework.

I went to the house, and as I walked inside, I noticed my stepson Houstin’s leftovers on the counter and thought, *I’m not cleaning that up right now.*

I would have let the dogs out, but I was in a hurry.

They were whining at the door for me, so I yelled to them, “Boys, I’ll be home in an hour!”

I needed to bring Cameron's basketball clothes to him at school. I walked straight to his room, grabbed his stuff, and walked out the back door. I dropped off the clothes at school and went back to the office.

Kilee called me.

She called every day after school to let me know she'd gotten home all right. We talked about everyday stuff. She never mentioned anything about having a bad day—bombing the Spanish test—but she did say something about her phone arriving broken. She was frustrated. She told me she didn't have much homework.

We talked about plans for that week. Since soccer had ended two weeks earlier, she had more free time.

I told her I'd be home around 4:30 to help her get ready to go to her dad's house. She had a very neat and pretty room and always liked to make sure everything was picked up and in order before she left. So I would often help her with that.

Before hanging up, I told her, "I love you."

"I love you, too, Mom."

My sister, Amy, is my coworker. She is also my best friend. As she came into my office, I remember noticing the time: 3:53. We talked for a while about her daughter, Loren, and Kilee and their friendship.

Kilee and Loren are cousins and best friends. They'd hit a rough patch. Kilee is hardheaded and Loren is tenderhearted. But they were starting to get close again.

Squealing sirens interrupted us.

# CHAPTER 14

## The Next Phase

***Kilee:***

In May 2016, before high school graduation, Mom and I released the first edition of *Beautiful Scars*. We had our launch event at Shriners in Cincinnati, and I was interviewed by local TV a few more times.

To say I am a published author sounds so sophisticated and like it comes with a celebrity life. I always felt like my life would soon become like Dan Humphrey's in *Gossip Girl*, living on the Upper East Side of New York City and being able to afford it. That is so not the case! My life has stayed completely the same. The only thing that has changed is that I now have a very dramatic “fun” fact to tell people

while we are doing our icebreakers to get to know our classmates better!

A few weeks later, on June 2, I finally turned eighteen, and it felt great! It was the sense of freedom that every teenager longs for since they were sixteen years old. Even though I was still living at home with my parents, I was given so much more freedom. Of course, I had to beg for my curfew to be later, but I was able to do so much more than I was able to do before. My parents knew I was always a responsible person, so they knew I would be responsible with the freedom they gave me.

## Sharing the Message

Over my summer break, we made time to travel and speak to people about what I have been through. I went to hospitals, Shriners meetings, libraries, and so much more. I love being able to tell my story, because it is one that people often find inspiring. Most people want to hear about it and learn more about Shriners; that is one of the reasons why I love speaking to people. I love teaching people who otherwise might not have known about Shriners. It is very rewarding knowing I am helping Shriners in some way.

While that is a great feeling, my favorite thing to do is to interact with the patients at Shriners. I love talking with them and hearing their stories. I know that most children are emotionally damaged from what they have been through, and I am perfectly OK with sharing my story with them. I hope to inspire them to want to keep getting better

and to keep trying harder. And if it is possible, I want them to be OK with sharing their story, too. I love being able to help people, and that is what I hope I am doing when I speak to different groups.

The most memorable reaction I have had after speaking is when I visited the Shriners hospital in Boston in August 2016. I was able to meet with a little girl and her parents. She was about seven years old and had been badly burned. She was in the miserable phase of her hospital stay, the part I thankfully don't remember much of from my own recovery. I got to talk with this little girl and tell her that at one point, I was just like her. I showed her how I looked and reminded her that she could look just as good as I did with my scars. I encouraged her to keep fighting. I'm not sure if I made her feel better, but I know for sure that I made her parents feel better. They were able to realize how far I had come, and they knew their little girl could do the same.

It was so memorable because it was the first time I was ever able to talk to a current patient. I had talked to patients like me who went back to the hospital occasionally, but that was the first time I was able to reassure a family that their child would be OK and still live a normal life.

Meeting other people like me always makes me feel like I am a part of a community. We all have been through our own struggles, and we are able to bond over them. I have made lots of new friends because of my summer travels and adventures to places like Boston, Las Vegas, and Sacramento, as well as local events in the Cincinnati area. It is so much fun being able to connect with others on a level that most adults wouldn't even understand.



**Lori:**

I see her standing in front of large groups of people and talking, and I think, *Is this my child? There's no way this is my kid!* I knew she was confident, but I didn't know she was that confident to be capable of doing things like that. After the fourth or fifth time I saw her being interviewed, I was like, *Yeah, she'll nail this.*

She speaks from her heart. She doesn't prepare a lot, because she speaks what's on her mind, and it's very real. She doesn't use notes or anything; it's very natural. I am highly impressed.

There is a whole other level of Kilee that we hadn't seen before. Probably almost every time she speaks in public, I get a little tear in my eye. I always say, "She's just special. She has a mission."

When Kilee speaks, it's not planned out. That's what's great about Kilee. She's not trying to get everyone's approval. It's from her heart. Her intentions are in the right place.

## College: A New Adventure

When it was time to take Kilee to Xavier, I was excited for the drop-off day, but a little anxious. I just wanted it to be over so I didn't have to keep worrying about it. Loren being

there made it much easier, because I knew if Kilee needed somebody, Loren would be there for her.

That day, Kilee drove herself. I rode with Wade, and Brooke and Jason rode together. It was a little weird in the morning to realize we were going to drop Kilee off and she wouldn't be back for at least a month. I knew the emotions would come later, but I just wanted to get through the day. When we were on campus, they kept us busy. We got to meet the roommates and their parents, and we felt really good about that.

Kilee's room was small. So I tried not to focus on her being gone from me. Instead, I focused on complaining about the size of the room, just to take my mind off the bigger picture.

We helped her put her stuff away, get organized, and make her bed. It was a really neat experience, because we were there to help her go on her next step.

As part of the day, they take you into the gym and give you an hour-long lesson on leaving your kids. We were in an assembly with the president and dean of students. At one point, they said, "OK, hug your loved ones now." They talked about how important it is that parents "be there" for their kids but not be actually there. In the middle of all of this, Kilee and I started cracking up. Something got us laughing and we couldn't stop, and that helped us get through without crying. We found humor instead of sadness. We were being strong and not getting too upset about the change.

When we walked out, we told Wade about it, which was another five minutes of getting a chuckle.



After the assembly, the parents were asked to leave. I didn't cry and Kilee didn't cry. We needed that laugh.

*She's not going away forever*, I thought, *it's only an hour away*. If she needs to come home, she can, and if we need to see her, we can. When we walked out the door, we said our goodbyes, gave her a hug, and she was fine.

The students have a very busy, structured first three days of orientation. I looked forward to getting the calls from Kilee every night. The first night, she told me she'd met somebody and he was so cute. I felt better that she'd made friends. I guess part of me was worried about people staring, but we expect it, so we ignore it. I don't pay that much attention to it anymore; I know in my heart she'll be fine.



***Kilee:***

Coming to a whole new place, I knew it would be tough making new friends. I have never been great at making friends. I was worried about living with someone I didn't know, and I was worried about making connections with new people. I had always heard people say that the friends you make in college last forever.

Surprisingly, only a handful of people asked me about my scars, and they were people I was familiar with. I was comfortable sharing with them, and I think the only reason

they didn't ask sooner was because they were worried I would be offended. At Xavier, I feel completely comfortable and accepted. I love Xavier, and I am happy to know I'll be there for the next few years.

Having a roommate is something every college freshman is unsure about at first. It is hard to imagine yourself living with someone you don't know at all. And to be completely honest, it is a strange thing to get used to. Once you adjust and understand that almost everyone has to do it, it isn't so bad. I enjoy living with someone who is very similar to me, and I have become friends with my roommate.

There's actually a crazy story that goes along with this. My roommate is from Chicago, and her best friend from high school goes to Xavier too. When we were first getting to know each other, she had asked if I knew someone named Joanne. This caught me off guard, because Joanne was my nurse at Shriners. My roommate's friend and her family are friends with Joanne and her family. They lived right beside each other! I thought that was so cool and just proved that we actually live in a very small world, and you never know how you are going to make connections with people.

Most people look back on high school and think about how much they wish they were in high school still. I don't feel that way. High school was a great time in my life, but now that I know what college is like, I would never want to go back. College life is extremely fun, and the freedom I have now is something I would never give up. I love college, and the new friends I have made here are a big part of the reason I enjoy it so much.

But I do miss my high school friends an incredible amount. I think it would be cool to be able to experience college with the people you spent your whole life with in high school and grade school. I miss having our gossip sessions whenever we needed it, I miss playing soccer with them, I miss hanging out with them, and I just miss them being around.

I'm very happy, though, that I've moved on from some relationships and that I've learned from them. I am a strong believer that certain people are in certain periods of your life for a reason. Some are part of a learning process, and some are there to stay. Either way, you are supposed to learn from these people. People change, feelings change, and relationships change. It is all a part of life, and everyone will experience it at some point. In the past few years, I have learned a lot about myself and the people around me, and I'm a better person for it.



***Lori:***

Kilee had been gone about three months, when the second anniversary of the accident was approaching.

She didn't know if she'd be able to do anything on November 10, so I'd messaged her friend earlier that week

and told him I really wanted to surprise Kilee on the two-year anniversary. I couldn't imagine going that day without seeing her. I wanted to just go and surprise her at the dorm. So he told her he would take her to dinner, and we stood outside and waited for them. When she came down, she was stunned! She was so excited!

I felt so much better about it, being able to see her. I wouldn't have been able to forgive myself if I'd known I could have gone and didn't.

I made sure I told her I couldn't imagine not seeing her on that day. It's just more of a memorial type of thing. We know what happened, and we know where we are today as a result. And we feel like we're better people because of it.

Something happens every single day that makes me think about the accident or get a little emotional. For a while, probably until Kilee went to college, I still cried every day. When she left, I was able to let go a little bit. She's an adult, and she's able to be more responsible for herself.

I can't always take care of Kilee 24/7, and it's not my job anymore. She's a young woman, and she's living her dreams, and I accept that.

I started missing her around the anniversary and close to the holidays. I got really emotional at that time. I started to see, too, how much of an impact she'd had on Cam and how much she affected him when she was home. We made it a joke: "She doesn't need to stay at college. She can just come home." She gets a kick out of that but says, "Mom, I'm never coming back to the country!"

When she came home for Thanksgiving, it really hit me. We'd also gone to Las Vegas with her earlier that month for

a Shriners golf event and spent extra time with her around the anniversary, and we had a book signing in November, too. Getting back in the habit of seeing her made it hard to get used to not seeing her again.

## An Unexpected Romance

### *Kilee:*

I am in a new relationship now, and it has been one of the best experiences of my life. We met at Xavier, and it all is actually a crazy story. We were in the same orientation group and immediately connected. After orientation weekend, we realized that we lived in the same building, on the same floor. We ended up being in the same first-year class that every freshman has to take. Everything was perfectly aligned for us to meet each other.

Thinking about that now, it is really a crazy thing, and I love telling the story. Because we didn't know each other before college, it is so much fun to get to learn new things about each other. The first time I told Alec about my story, we had known each other for only a couple weeks. We had been spending a lot of time together, and I felt like he had wondered about it for a while. I didn't want to not address the elephant in the room, so one night when we were just

talking and getting to know each other, I told him everything. Telling someone who didn't already know me about my story was something I had done multiple times before. But this time was different. I knew I wasn't telling someone I would probably never see again. I was telling a person I knew would be around, and somehow I wasn't nervous.

He reacted so well to it and continued to be the same person toward me. He didn't change the way he felt, and that meant so much to me. Of course, he still had a lot of questions, but I let him know I was OK with talking about it and that he could always ask anything if he was curious.

Forming a new relationship with someone wasn't as hard as I originally thought it would be. It wasn't something that was planned; it just happened. I think that is what is so cool about it all. I didn't come to college looking for someone, because I was just out of a relationship. I came to college with the mind-set that I was going to do my own thing, and if something happened to come along, I would consider it.

Once I had been around Alec for a little while, I was hoping that something would come of us meeting. Like I said before, relationships are meant for certain parts of your life; some are going to last, and some aren't. I was happy to move on with my relationships, and I still am so happy that I was fortunate enough to realize all of this.



**Lori:**

At first I thought, *Oh, great, she's met friends.*

Then I thought, *Take it easy and get to know each other. You'll know if it's right to be together.*

At first, they just hung out with their group of friends. Kilee was smitten, but it didn't really get serious until October. They're really close as friends, too. They got personal before getting together as a couple.

As a mom, you're always going to worry about other people loving and accepting your child. I thought, *Wow, if he's accepting of her scars and all she's been through, then he must be a remarkable kid.*

## Looking to the Future

**Kilee:**

I am looking forward to where I will go next. Before college, it was the furthest I could see into the future. Now I realize after college I can go wherever I want and do whatever I want. I don't have to go back home to my parents; I will be old enough to live life on my own.

I am excited and nervous at the same time for this, because it is always scary to not know what will happen, but that is also the fun part. I get to make my life how I want it and learn more about myself along the way. For now, I will just continue to live my life one day at a time.