

# FIRE STORM

KAELY QUINN PROFILER

BOOK TWO

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To my brother, Danny.  
When we were kids, I usually walked ahead of you,  
but this time you took the lead.  
I love you so much.  
See you soon.

# PROLOGUE

He waits, hidden in the shadows of the tall, stately trees that line the street. He is the only one who knows that hell has just opened its door. Houses stand as monuments to the families sleeping peacefully inside, unaware that this day will be like no other. A day that will be seared into their psyches for the rest of their lives.

First comes the smoke, the deadly stench overcoming the scent of flowers from gardens dotting the neighborhood. A thick plume of black slips up into the early morning air.

Suddenly there is a whoosh that seems to suck all the air out of the world. Like a silent storm. Grasping fingers of flames reach out, clutching hungrily for anything they can utterly destroy.

The sleepy neighborhood begins to wake up. People run outside to stare at the monstrosity rising to life down the street, horrified by what they see and ashamed to be grateful it isn't happening to them.

The silence of the morning explodes with the high wail of fire trucks, confirming that the façade of safety residents had trusted to keep them from this moment has literally gone up in smoke.

This is judgment. This is righteousness.

A familiar old verse slips from his lips. “Jack be nimble, Jack be quick, Jack jump over the candlestick. Jack jump high, Jack jump low, Jack jumped over and burned his toe.”

He laughs and slowly walks away, not garnering any attention. All eyes are on the great red-and-yellow beast devouring 319 Harbor Lane.

**Eighteen years later**

Kaely turned the heat up in her recently purchased SUV. She spent most of her time in government-owned cars. Having her own vehicle gave her a sense of control. Helped her feel a little more independent.

She checked her GPS. It was set for Darkwater, Nebraska, a small, nondescript Midwestern town in flyover country.

Kaely hadn't planned to visit her mother, but a call from her brother, Jason, changed everything. "*Jessie,*" he'd said, using her given name. "*Mom is sick. Really sick. The doctors thought they got all the cancer, but it seems to have surged back with a vengeance. It's stage three. She's on some kind of experimental treatment, but the doctor says there's no guarantee it'll work. I think you need to see her before . . . well, just come, sis. Please.*"

Finding out about her mother's condition at this late stage irritated Kaely, but that's the way communicating with Marcie had been for years. After Kaely's dad was revealed as the notorious Raggedy Man, a serial killer who terrorized Des Moines, the relationship between Marcie and her children shattered. Although Marcie took care of their physical needs, she closed off emotionally. It seemed that every time she looked at Kaely and Jason, all she could see was the husband she hated.

After their lives completely imploded, her mother moved Kaely and her brother to Lincoln, Nebraska. They had no friends left in Des Moines, and it was clear the entire city wanted

them gone, hoping that if the monster's family left, the stench of evil might fade away too.

Several years after Kaely and Jason moved out, their mother married again and relocated to Grand Island. It seemed life had given her a second chance. Then, about six months ago, her second marriage fell apart. Marcie promptly packed up and moved to Darkwater. Kaely had no idea why, but she suspected her mother wanted a place where she could disappear. Darkwater sounded like the perfect place to achieve that goal.

Although Kaely called Marcie occasionally, the length of time between calls had begun to stretch out further and further. Complicating the situation was Marcie's revulsion toward Kaely's work with the FBI, where she sought to put away people just like her father. Kaely couldn't really blame her mother for how she felt. She had observed a psychopathic serial killer firsthand. That was enough for any human being in one lifetime.

Kaely had taken two weeks off work—packed on Saturday, left on Sunday, and was arriving on Monday. She still wasn't sure just what she could do for her mother. *"Just let her know you care about her,"* Jason had said. *"Mom has a lot of regrets. If she doesn't get better . . . I mean, are you happy with the way things are now?"*

Of course she wasn't. She knew she had to try to fix things with her mother. Give God a chance to heal their broken relationship.

She was looking forward to seeing Jason again. He owned a successful vintage auto body shop in Colorado. He'd left it in the hands of his staff and traveled to Darkwater to care for their mother. He'd even put off his upcoming wedding. He'd given up everything to be at his mother's side during her illness. There

was no way Kaely could turn down his request. So now, here she was, driving through Nebraska, trying to find Darkwater.

“Don’t let her manipulate you. She’ll try, you know.”

Kaely sighed at Georgie’s admonishment. “Maybe she’s changed.” She glanced over at her friend, whose direct stare made Kaely uncomfortable.

“If she’d changed, she would have called you herself to let you know she was sick. Not have Jason do it.”

“Look, I’m going in there with a good attitude. My expectations are . . . low. But God can fix what people aren’t able to. I can’t shut the door entirely, can I?” She arched her eyebrow at Georgie, who smiled, her brown curls bouncing as she shook her head.

“You want me to tell you to have hope.” Georgie sighed. “Just be careful. I don’t want to see you hurt.”

Kaely laughed lightly. “You mean I don’t want to see myself get hurt.”

“Well, I am you, right?”

“You keep showing up out of the blue. You’re not supposed to come unless I call you.”

“And yet I’m here.”

“And yet you’re here . . .” Kaely repeated slowly.

The real Georgie had been her best friend in junior high. When her dad was arrested, Georgie’s parents refused to let the girls get together. Losing that friendship had been devastating. This version of Georgie was someone Kaely created a few years ago when she needed someone to talk to about feelings she couldn’t share with anyone else. Now Georgie was a debate device, a way to balance her emotions against her common sense. Maybe she’d become a crutch, but Kaely needed her.

“You don’t want me to leave,” Georgie stated firmly.

“No, I don’t. I just . . . well, I’d rather you stop popping up on your own. I feel like . . .” Kaely took a deep breath. “I feel like I’m losing control.”

Georgie was silent for a moment. “You haven’t recovered from what happened in St. Louis, you know.”

“I don’t want to talk about that,” Kaely snapped.

“It’s been three months. You’ll have to face it sooner or later. You’re aware of it. If you weren’t, I wouldn’t be warning you.”

Kaely waved her free hand toward Georgie. “Go. Right now.” When she glanced over at the passenger seat, it was empty.

Kaely couldn’t think about what had happened in St. Louis and her mother at the same time. Once she was home, when she was ready, she’d try to make sense of it. Her boss, Special Agent in Charge Solomon Slattery, had insisted she talk to a therapist the Bureau used from time to time. She’d tried to open up to him, but she just couldn’t. She’d prayed about it. Asked God for help. So far there had been only silence, but she was confident He was listening. That He was there for her. He’d healed her from so much already. Unfortunately, she still had a long way to go.

Trusting anyone was tough for Kaely. Her father’s betrayal still haunted her. Until she could banish his ghost, she couldn’t risk getting too close to anyone. She kept men at arm’s length, and the past had proven she was right to do so.

She was beginning to depend on Noah Hunter, an agent she’d worked with several times, but she didn’t trust him enough to tell him about Georgie—or a lot of other things. Still, she had a feeling about him. That they would end up being close friends. But for now, she liked their relationship as it was.

She smiled to herself as she remembered there was someone else she could talk to. Someone real. Of course, he didn’t actu-

ally talk back. Well, he did, but not in a way she could always understand.

A month ago she'd acquired a cat, a large Maine coon she'd named Mr. Hoover. Before adopting him from a local rescue organization, she'd spent a few months pretending she had a cat just to prove to herself she could actually care for a living creature. When she was sufficiently certain a pet could survive in her home, Mr. Hoover moved in. He'd previously been named Sampson and had been left behind in an apartment when his family moved out. Kaely's blood had boiled when she'd heard his story.

At first, Mr. Hoover was distrustful and anxious. But he'd finally settled down. A week after moving in with Kaely, he started jumping up on her bed at night and curling up next to her. One night Kaely heard him purr for the first time. As silly as it sounded, she cried for joy.

Then the call came from Jason. She hadn't expected to have to leave Mr. Hoover so soon. She rarely traveled now, but someday that could change, as her dream was to go back to Quantico. If that happened, she would have to travel when the Behavioral Analysis Unit was called on for assistance. She would receive a per diem that would allow her to rent a hotel room or apartment, and she'd be able to take Mr. Hoover with her. If she wasn't certain she could care for him if she moved back to Virginia, she wouldn't have taken him in. Mr. Hoover wouldn't be abandoned again.

Thankfully, her boss's wife offered to take the cat while Kaely was gone. She felt comfortable with Solomon and Joyce, and she was confident they would take good care of Mr. Hoover. But Kaely could still see the look on Mr. Hoover's face when she walked out of the Slatterys' house. Was he wondering if

she would come back for him? Just thinking about it brought tears to her eyes.

Kaely probably trusted Solomon more than anyone she knew. He had always supported her. When Quantico forced her to leave when the truth about her father became public, Solomon took her in willingly. He even knew about her peculiar profiling methods and not only accepted them but made her feel they were beneficial. Valuable.

Kaely checked her GPS one more time. She'd need to turn off the highway in about three miles. She glanced at the clock on her dash. A little after four in the afternoon. Maybe she could have supper with her mother and brother and then scoot off to the B&B where she'd made a reservation. She'd spent ten hours in the car yesterday. Today she didn't get on the road until almost ten o'clock, but she'd driven almost five hours. She kept finding excuses to stop along the way. Probably because she wasn't in a hurry to arrive in Darkwater. Her stomach clenched at the thought of confronting her mother. Here she was, a one-time behavioral analyst with the FBI, someone trained to hunt down the most evil people on the planet, and she was afraid to face her own mother. She sighed and tightened her grip on the steering wheel.

"You really need to be careful," Georgie whispered from the back seat this time. "You could walk into another trap. Like you did in St. Louis."

"Hush," Kaely said sharply. "I mean it."

She didn't need any extra pressure right now. This trip was stressing her enough.

She took the turn toward Darkwater. Up ahead, she saw a convenience store. Although she still had half a tank of gas, she pulled in. Better to get gas now since she had no idea what

to expect in the small town. Of course, there were over seven thousand people living there. They had to have a gas station. She shook her head as she got out of the car. She was stalling.

Kaely filled her car with gas and then went inside the store to get a candy bar. She grabbed several PayDays, her favorite. She paid for the candy and was headed for the door when she noticed a pile of newspapers on the counter. She caught the cashier's eye and pointed at them.

"How much?" she asked.

The cashier shrugged. "Free."

Kaely thanked her and grabbed a paper. *The Darkwater Digest*. Creative. She went out to her SUV and tossed the paper in the passenger seat. After taking a drink from the coffee in her thermos, she opened one of the PayDays. Early February temperatures in Nebraska had plummeted below their usual frigidness, and snow was in the forecast. Kaely was prepared. She had special tires put on her car. She had no plans to get trapped in Darkwater, Nebraska. She'd drive in over ten inches of snow and ice if she had to. Whatever it took to get home.

As she munched on her candy bar, she decided to check out the *Digest*. Maybe she could learn something about the town her mother had chosen to fade into. On the front page, the big story seemed to involve several house fires. The fire chief was railing against the use of space heaters during cold weather. "*Many of them are cheaply made,*" he'd said to the *Digest's* reporter. "*People think they can save money by turning down the heat at night and using a space heater. But losing your house, your belongings, and maybe even your life is much more costly.*"

"Boy, this guy really hates space heaters," Kaely muttered.

He went on to say that the fire department would be repeating

a safety class about the use of space heaters and encouraged residents to attend.

Kaely had to admit she was impressed. He seemed dedicated to keeping his community protected. She took another bite of her candy bar and squinted at the grainy photo of the chief. Nice looking but intense.

There was also a quote from the local sheriff. This picture was a little clearer. A good-looking man with blond hair who also encouraged residents to take safety precautions during cold weather. The end of the article mentioned that Sheriff Brotton had lost an election in November. It seemed he was filling in for the new sheriff who couldn't take office until March due to illness in his family.

She turned the page and found a list of recent fires in Darkwater. In the past two months, there had been three. One death. An older woman living with her family had died of smoke inhalation. *Three fires in two months for a town this size is unusual*, Kaely thought. A rather crudely drawn map showed the various locations where the fires had started. A note under the map indicated where the lone death had occurred.

As she looked at the map, Kaely took a deep breath. She carefully studied it again to make certain her initial impression was right. A second look only confirmed her suspicion. She didn't like the locations of the fires. Her training told her that the fires in Darkwater might not be random accidents. Was it possible Darkwater was being targeted by a serial arsonist?