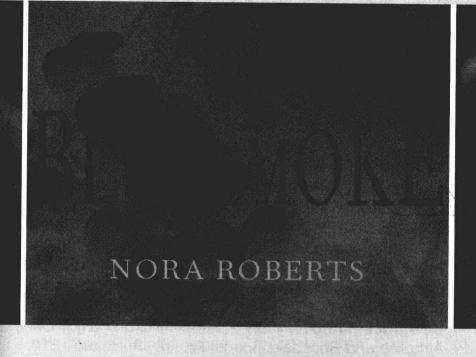
# BH

BLUE SMOKE



# Doubleday Large Print Home Library Edition

G. P. Putnam's Sons
New York

This Large Print Edition, prepared especially for Doubleday Large Print Home Library, contains the complete, unabridged text of the original Publisher's Edition.



### G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

Publishers Since 1838

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.) • Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd) Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd) • Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park. New Delhi-110 017, India Penguin Group (NZ), Cnr Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany, Auckland 1310, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd) • Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

### Copyright © 2005 by Nora Roberts

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without permission. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

### ISBN 0-7394-5880-9

### Printed in the United States of America

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

While the author has made every effort to provide accurate telephone numbers and Internet addresses at the time of publication, neither the publisher nor the author assumes any responsibility for errors, or for changes that occur after publication. Further, the publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.



This Large Print Book carries the Seal of Approval of N.A.V.H.

# POINT OF ORIGIN

-60 m

The specific location at which a fire was ignited.

Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill.

William Shakespeare



## **PROLOGUE**

Fire became in heat and smoke and light. Like some preternatural beast clawing its way from the womb, it burst to life with a cackle that rose to a roar.

And changed everything in one magnificent instant.

Like that beast, it slithered, snaked its way over wood, and scored what had been clean and bright with its black and powerful fingers.

It had eyes, red and all seeing, and a mind so brilliant, so complete, it memorized everything in its orbit.

He saw it as a kind of entity, a gilded,

crimson god that existed only to destroy. And it took what it wanted without remorse, without mercy. With such *ardor*.

Everything fell before it, kneeling supplicants that worshipped even as they were consumed.

But he had made it, created it. So he was the god of fire. More powerful than the flames, more canny than the heat, more stunning than the smoke.

It hadn't lived until he gave it breath.

Watching it become, he fell in love.

The light flickered over his face, danced in his fascinated eyes. He took a beer, savored its sharp coolness in his throat as his skin streamed with the heat.

There was excitement in his belly, wonder in his mind. Possibilities flashing through his imagination as the fire streaked up the walls.

It was beautiful. It was strong. It was fun.

Watching it become, he became. And his destiny was scored into him, branding heart and soul.

### BALTIMORE, 1985

Catarina Hale's childhood ended on a steamy August night a few hours after the Orioles demolished the Rangers at Memorial Stadium, kicking their Texas butts—as her dad said—nine to one. Her parents had taken a rare night off to haul the whole family to the game, which made the win all the sweeter. Most nights one of them, often both, put in long hours at Sirico's, the pizzeria they'd taken over from her mother's father. And the place where, eighteen years before, her parents had met. Her mother, a young, vibrant eigh-

teen—so the story went—when the twenty-year-old Gibson Hale had swaggered in for a slice.

Went in for pizza, he liked to say, and got myself an Italian goddess.

Her father talked weird that way, a lot. But Reena liked to hear it.

Got himself a pizzeria, too, ten years later when Poppi and Nuni decided it was time to put their traveling shoes on. Bianca, the youngest of five and their only daughter, took it over with her Gib as none of her brothers wanted the place.

Sirico's had stood in the same spot in Baltimore's Little Italy for over forty-three years. Which was even older than Reena's father, a fact—that amazed her. Now her father—who didn't have even a single drop of Italian blood in his whole body—ran the place, along with her mother—who was Italian all the way through to the bone.

Sirico's was almost always busy, and a *lot* of work, but Reena didn't mind, even when she had to help. Her older sister, Isabella, complained because sometimes she had to work there on Saturday nights instead of going out on a date, or with her friends. But Bella complained almost all the time anyway.

She especially complained that their oldest sister, Francesca, had her own bedroom on the third floor while she had to share with Reena. Xander got his own room, too, because he was the only boy even though he was the youngest.

Sharing with Bella had been okay, it had even been fun until Bella got to be a teenager and decided she was too old to do anything but talk about boys or read fashion magazines or play with her hair.

Reena was eleven and five-sixths. The five-sixths was an essential addition because it meant she had only fourteen months until *she* was a teenager. This was currently her most fervent ambition, overtaking previous ambitions such as becoming a nun or marrying Tom Cruise.

On this hot and heavy August night when Reena was eleven and five-sixths, she awoke in the dark with hard, cramping pains in her belly. She curled up, trying to make herself into a ball and biting her lip to hold back a moan. Across the room, as far as could be managed now that Bella was four-teen and more interested in having big hair than in being a big sister, Bella snored gently.

Reena rubbed at the ache and thought of the hot dogs and popcorn and candy she'd gobbled up at the ball game. Her mother told her she'd be sorry.

Couldn't her mother be wrong, even once?

She tried to offer it up, like the nuns were always saying, so some poor sinner could benefit from her bellyache. But it just hurt!

Maybe it wasn't from the hot dogs. Maybe it was from when Joey Pastorelli hit her in the stomach. He'd gotten in bad trouble for it. For knocking her down and ripping her shirt and calling her a name she didn't understand. Mr. Pastorelli and her father had gotten into a fight when her dad went to his house to "discuss the situation."

She'd heard them yelling at each other. Her father never yelled—well, hardly ever yelled. Her mother was the yeller because she was one hundred percent Italian and had a temper.

But boy had he yelled at Mr. Pastorelli. And he'd hugged her so hard when he got home.

And they'd gone to the ball game.

Maybe she was being punished for being glad Joey Pastorelli was going to get punished. And being a little glad he'd knocked

her down and torn her shirt because then they'd gone to the game and watched the O's stomp all over the Rangers.

Or maybe she had internal injuries.

She knew you could get internal injuries and even *die* because she'd seen it on *Emergency!*, one of her and Xander's favorite shows.

The thought brought on another vicious cramp that had her eyes welling with tears. She started to get out of bed—she wanted her mother—and felt something wet between her thighs.

Sniffling, embarrassed she might have wet her pants like a baby, she crept out of the bedroom, down the hall toward the bathroom. She stepped inside the room with its pink tub and tiles and pulled up her *Ghost-busters* T-shirt.

Hot waves of fear rolled through her as she stared at the blood on her thighs. She was *dying*. Her ears began to ring. When the next cramp seized her belly, she opened her mouth to scream.

And understood.

Not dying, she thought. Not suffering from internal injuries. She had her period. She was having her first period.

Her mother had explained it all, about the eggs, and cycles and about becoming a woman. Both her sisters had periods every month, and so did her mother.

There was Kotex in the cabinet under the sink. Mama had shown her how to use it, and she'd locked herself in one day to practice. She cleaned herself up and tried not to be a sissy about it. It wasn't the blood that bothered her so much, but where it came from was pretty gross.

But she was grown-up now, grown-up enough to take care of what her mama told her was a natural thing, a female thing.

Because she was no longer sleepy, and she was now a woman, she decided to go down to the kitchen and have some ginger ale. It was so hot in the house—dog days, Dad called them. And she had so much to think about now that she'd *become*. She took her glass outside, to sit and sip and think on the white marble steps.

It was quiet enough that she heard the Pastorellis' dog bark in that hard, coughing way he had. And the streetlights were glowing. It made her feel like she was the only one in the world who was awake. For right

now, she was the only one in the world who knew what had happened inside her body.

She sipped her drink and thought about what it would be like going back to school next month. How many of the girls had gotten their period over the summer.

She would start to get breasts now. She looked down at her chest and wondered what *that* would be like. What it would feel like. You didn't feel your hair grow, or your fingernails, but maybe you could feel breasts growing.

Weird, but interesting.

If they'd start to grow now, she'd have them by the time she was *finally* a teenager.

She sat on the marble steps, a still flatchested girl with a tender tummy. Her crop of honey-blond hair going frizzy in the humidity, her long-lidded tawny eyes getting heavy. There was a little mole just above the right corner of her top lip, and braces on her teeth.

On that sultry night the present seemed absolutely safe, the future a misty dream.

She yawned once, blinked sleepily. As she rose to go back in, her gaze swept down the street toward Sirico's, where it had stood since even before her father was born. At

first she thought the flickering light she saw in the big front window was some kind of reflection, and she thought, Pretty.

Her lips curved as she continued to study it, then her head cocked in puzzlement. It didn't really look like a reflection, or like someone had forgotten to turn off all the lights at closing.

Curious, she stepped down to the sidewalk, the glass still in her hand.

Too intrigued to consider just how her mother would skin her for walking out alone in the middle of the night, even on her own block, Reena wandered down the sidewalk.

And her heart began to thud when what she saw began to filter through the dreamy sleepiness. Smoke poured out the front door, a door that wasn't closed. The lights she saw were flames.

"Fire." She whispered it first, then screamed it as she ran back to the house and flew through the front door.

She would never forget it, not for all of her life, standing with her family while Sirico's burned. The roar of the fire as it stabbed through broken windows, shot up in quick gold towers, was a constant thrum in her

ears. There were sirens screaming, whooshing gusts of water pumping out of the big hoses, weeping and shouting. But the sound of the fire, the voice of it, overpowered everything else.

She could feel it inside her belly, the fire, like the cramping. The wonder and horror, the awful beauty of it, pulsed there.

What was it like inside the fire, inside where the firemen went? Hot and dark? Thick and bright? Some of the flames looked like big tongues, lapping out, curling back like they could taste what they burned.

Smoke rolled, pluming out, rising. It stung her eyes, her nose, even as the whirling dance of flame dazzled her eyes. Her feet were still bare, and the asphalt felt like heated coals. But she couldn't step away, couldn't take her eyes off the spectacle, like some mad and ferocious circus.

Something exploded, and there were more screams in response. Firemen in helmets, faces blackened by the smoke and ash, moved like ghosts in the haze of smoke. Like soldiers, she thought. It sounded like a war movie.

And yet even the water sparkled as it flew through the air.