

**LBRIS**

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books

**BURN  
THE  
WATER**

A NOVEL

**BY BILLY RAY**

 **SCHOLASTIC**

# ONE

The young woman sighed.

London had drowned, peril had won, and there was so much she didn't yet know.

She didn't know if she'd survive this day, or the next one. Didn't know that a pax—peace—was possible. Didn't know that one day Love and Water would finally clash, and that one of those two giants would win. Uncertainty was her lot.

But she had courage, and courage matters. It wins wars and builds nations and inspires the doubtful and crosses rivers. And she had so *many* rivers to cross.

So she continued. Bravely.

Autumn had come and the air was cold and insects flitted above Shooter's Hill, darting and humming and feeding and flying. Their sounds were rebirth; the river couldn't touch them. Shooter's Hill was elevated, rising above the swollen Thames, part of London's "Dry Ten," the 10 percent of the city that *wasn't* underwater, off the A205 road. Once—when pavement had meant promise and progress, and vehicles were a necessity—this hill had been a charming suburb. Little shops, humble homes, a quiet park.

Now, in the twenty-fifth year of the twenty-fifth century, it was

lush jungle, trees and grasses wildly overgrowing, smothering what had formerly been black asphalt with verdant green, oxygenating the air for all those winged miracles fluttering above—while on land, dreams continued to drown.

Rain had fallen that morning, and all that foliage—along with a thin layer of mud—felt slick underfoot. She hobbled over it, grimacing in pain, an empty sack slung over her shoulder.

Jule. Her ankle was broken, but her hands were strong and her face was kind, unmarked save for a single small but permanent scar on her chin, its origin known only to her.

Like everyone else in England, she wore clothing that had survived centuries of weather, abandonment, theft, and reuse: a leather jacket, denim jeans patched over dozens of times with needle and thread. Her shirt was made from a version of cotton grown in greenhouses. Her sweater was woolen. Her boots were old and reshod.

It was hard for her to walk down this village road without imagining what it had once been, before the Great Soak and that sadly historic British day in the 2100s when the Thames first climbed over its banks and stubbornly refused to retreat. Jule now passed what were once shops and small eateries, long since gutted, mere shells suffocated by the swarming embrace of branches and leaves. Each business had been someone's livelihood and someone else's refuge. People had congregated on this very lane to make commerce and to talk about the news or a football match or the tabloids or a relative's wedding.

Jule envied them all, nostalgic for a time she'd never actually lived.

She felt it every time the sky went pink, or trees whispered, or grass glistened, or a parent held a child, or the world felt clean. But she kept her longing buried inside like a hidden wound and hobbled on, each step labored. There were no vehicles here. *Anything* made of metal had been seized long ago to be repurposed into sluggers, mini-balls for guns, by two rival armies, the Rogues and the Crowns, in their centuries-long war. Every mailbox from every building, every door handle and lock, they'd all been forged, Crowns and Rogues surrendering individual privacy in order to make it easier to kill one another. Both Houses had rules forbidding *any* personal use of metals. The only jewelry one saw was made of twine. Jule didn't wear any.

With that slick grass underfoot, she hobbled toward a street corner where two male soldiers stood at ease, lazily guarding a beech tree.

Beech trees mattered in London. People killed for them.

The two soldiers wore armbands, black ones, which told the world, *Here stands a soldier of the Rogue Army.*

When they saw Jule approaching—slowly—the two men broke into drunken grins. She was injured, helpless. Not even a crutch to protect her. And she wore no armband—black *or* gold—which meant she was a *Hab*, and therefore belonged to neither of the two warring Houses. That made her unsponsored, unimportant.

The taller of the two Rogues called out to Jule, his tongue a bit thick. "What's your business?"

*Yes, drunk.*

Jule, still twenty feet away, answered: "Just a Hab. May I pass?"

The tall soldier smiled at his mate, then: "Well, that depends. This is a toll road."

Jule sighed. "A toll road."

"Yup. And a girl like you might have to pay *twice*." He laughed. So did his fellow soldier. Jule knew what was coming. It had happened before. She approached slowly. "Sirs, may I pass?"

"That hobble of yours looks pretty bad, missy. Maybe you should just lie down for a bit."

She was close enough to speak quietly now, almost an exhale. "Must it always come to this?"

The tall one nodded. "Yes. It must." He felt a stir in his groin and he obeyed it, grabbing her.

That fast, Jule produced a dagger from the back of her belt and slashed his throat with it—one short, sharp thrust. Before the other could react, Jule gutted him. Their bodies fell.

Just eighteen, Jule cleaned her blade on their clothes, then used it to saw some bark off the beech tree, gathering it in the sack, which had been her aim all along.

Two dead Rogues. Two fewer enemies to kill in battle, two fewer threats to the army she'd spent her life serving.

She marched down the A205 road, her ankle healthy and well.

And while it didn't help them much, those two sloppy soldiers would enter the afterlife knowing that they had been dispatched by the fiercest and most famous soldier the Crown Army ever produced.

Also the loneliest.

The Thames was Central London's highway, weaving through the city like greedy arteries. He rowed atop it in a wooden pirogue, six feet above what had once been Bricker Lane, in a light drizzle.

Rafe. The name still echoes.

He was, at that moment, the Rogue Army's most venerated captain. Broken inside—they all knew that—there was a coldness to him; in battle and out, his face was a stone. But he was a soldier's soldier, and had been for six years. Also a gifted strategist, his mind never still, his oars always seeming to move faster than everyone else's. Especially this morning. Word had come that one of his soldiers, a headstrong boy named Alger, was in danger behind Crown lines. And Rafe was rushing to rescue him.

London was the only home Rafe had ever known, the only place he'd ever *seen*—a wet and bloody chaos, much of it under six feet of polar water. Great buildings, once lions of commerce, soared into the sky above him. But their ground floors had no ground anymore. Eels swam through what had once been lobbies. And foliage wrapped around all those columns of glass and steel, entombing them in an embrace of vines and leaves and branches, so thick that no sunlight reflected off the windows anymore. The phantom towers were green and soft and tall. Happy birds nested in them, filling the rainy skies above with song. It was the year 2425; nothing was dry but the whistling of a chilly wind.

The West End was gone; Piccadilly was gone. The floor of Parliament was a pool. So was everything else that wasn't hilly. Fins now sliced the water beneath what had once been traffic lights. The buildings were caverns, the light bulbs glassy ghosts. And battle was Rafe's daily bread.

Rafe hated the water and had all his life. He knew—in this, his eighteenth year alive—that it would kill him someday. Swallow him. But the river was London's only thoroughfare, so he muscled through it, his oars slapping the foliage that floated here—flowers, kelp, mosses—and the thin slick of oily film that clung doggedly to the surface. The smell on the water was fishy, fetid, unclean. He turned it all into froth with each new stroke.

On both sides of Bricker Lane were tall wooden poles, once the bearers of electricity and communication, each now marked with black strips of cloth. *Rogue territory*. To Rafe's right and left, handfuls of Rogue citizens sat on the rooftops of shops, casting fishing lines into the swollen river, which crested just below their dangling feet.

They recognized Rafe. One day, everyone knew, he would lead the whole Rogue Army; General Shapcott had been grooming him for years. A few of the roof-toppers saluted Rafe proudly.

Rafe had no time to salute back. A soldier was in danger.

Life was tribal violence: the spear, the knife, the mace, the bow and arrow, or precious slugs fired from guns that had survived for centuries. Like everyone else on this benighted rock, Rafe awakened every morning trapped in a universe of battle, with no idea if wars like this one—or even life itself—existed beyond these shores anymore.

Death was fact. Truce was weakness. Peace was a fairy tale. And the entire city remained in the cross fire. His sworn enemy, the Crown Army, was tireless, its soldiers well trained and fierce.

Their finest, Rafe knew, was named Jule.

He'd seen her in battle once, gutting a close friend of his, her face half-masked in blood. She was famously relentless. And Rogue soldiers told stories about her, lionizing her.

Mostly, they *feared* her.

Rafe couldn't stand that. He hoped to encounter her again someday, just to show his colleagues that she was mortal.

The rain fell harder. He ducked his head as he sped beneath signage protruding from what had once been a seafood restaurant, a red-and-blue neon caricature of a happy flounder, so close to the surface it could nearly swim. Then Rafe reached his destination: the banks of Crown territory.

His fear stayed behind on the water.

## TWO

A boy in a knit cap raced down Worthing Street, in Woolwich. The strips of cloth on the now-dead power poles here were gold, meaning Crowns claimed this stretch.

The raindrops didn't seem to know the difference.

The hungry river had claimed all but the rooftops of Woolwich's former shops. Crabs crawled across a few of them. Seals squawked. Again, that scent of rotting fish was everywhere.

But Worthing Street rose steadily as one traveled south, escaping the brine to become dry land at Owing's Hill. There, the skeletons of old buildings provided shelter to a cluster of sad wanderers who were neither Rogue nor Crown. Habs.

Habs lived in London's margins, a primitive existence. Most worked in fields, like serfs. They grew the food that fed the Crown and Rogue armies, so those armies allowed them to live. Their clothes were burlap. Their shoes were wood. Their days were sludge.

On this day, four rain-soaked Habs stood around a beech tree, stripping its bark with a military kind of vigilance.

Suddenly, the boy in the knit cap—Alger—raced past them in a blur, bolting for Eltham Common. The Habs barely noticed.

But Alger was about to die, and he knew it.

Eltham Common was a grassy square that had once hummed with quiet life. Now it was a ghost. A gallows stood in its center; an old abandoned police station marked its northwest corner like a hulking statue. Alger reached an alcove and hid himself there, huddling and shaking, trying to catch his breath. His boots had no heels. His leather jacket was tattered. The knit cap had holes in it.

Alger had always expected to die in this fight. But not today. Not *yet*, on Crown land, running and hunted and despised. He was deep in the Churn.

That was a soldier's term for the caustic acid fire that frothed in the gut when death felt near and adrenaline and cortisone were pumping too hard to hold back. The Churn was unrelenting and merciless. Hot vinegar in your veins. It galloped and raced and crept and crawled—scathing and scalding, cymbals and Klaxons, the sirens of suck, echoing. The Churn was a soldier's hell.

All Alger had ever wanted was a position of command. As a child playing war games with other children, he'd always been the general. He was the best wrestler of his age group, the best archer, the best shot. He ran the fastest, never whined or disobeyed.

Rafe had spotted Alger early and begun guiding the boy, teaching him. As soon as Alger came of age, reaching twelve, he was placed into Rafe's regiment.

Once there, Alger became a remarkable soldier. He volunteered for the most dangerous assignments, his ambition unstoppable. But *this*

mission—to slip through Crown lines and sabotage the Crown forge—had been far too dangerous to support. Rafe had rejected it as soon as Alger had proposed it.

Alger had gone anyway. And now he'd been discovered, forcing him to run for his life . . .

He peeked out from the shadows of the alcove, rain hitting his face. But a stray dog, lean and hungry, the offspring of a thousand breeds, ambled by, spotted him, and barked loud enough to cut through the wind and rain.

In Alger's pocket was a corner of bread crust. He tossed it ten feet into the rain. The dog followed, a brief reprieve. But Alger knew that if he stayed in this alcove he would surely die. He had to keep running. Maybe all this rain would affect their aim. Maybe . . .

He exploded out of the alcove, sprinting lightning fast, heading for an old post office across the common, thanking God for all those foot-races he'd won as a kid.

An arrow instantly whizzed past his head. Then another, fired from windows that overlooked the square on all sides of him. He'd run right into a trap.

He kept going, trying to stay low. BANG-BANG. Sluggers tore past him, barely missing.

That post office was twenty feet away now. Refuge. Safety. Maybe. Screaming inside, he raced through the rain and wind.

Again, from those windows, from enemies met and unmet, death came at him. PHHFFT. PHHFFT. More arrows. Two of them grazed

his arms. He kept running, leaping over two dead bodies on the weed-choked pavement, the post office just ten feet away now.

Get there or die. The door was in reach, but—

A woman popped out from behind the post office door, knife in hand, thrust his way. Alger turned . . .

The knife buried itself in his arm. Agony. And their eyes met, just a flicker. Then Alger saw a sword in her other hand and he fled onto the common again, zigzagging, his arm shrieking with every stride.

The dog was at his heels now, biting, barking.

This wasn't the Churn. This was feral. *Keep running. You're going to be a general one day, and this will be the story all your soldiers will ask you to retell . . .*

Up ahead, two more enemies appeared from inside a long-dead flower shop. One had a gun, the other a bow. Both fired. A perfect hell.

The slugger missed. The arrow hit Alger's shoulder and burrowed in. He reversed course and hurled himself at full speed toward the opposite edge of the common, a corner. He got to it, arms pumping and bleeding, and he turned . . .

. . . right into a spiked mace, swung at his head. And everything went black. He saw nothing, heard nothing.

His left eye opened, half-lidded, and he was supine, barely alive, rain pelting his face. His front teeth had been knocked out.

High above him was a water tower. A gold flag flew atop it, sagging in the pouring rain. Everything flickered.

Two men leaned over him, Evander and Paris. Evander was Jule's

brother, a fifteen-year veteran of this war. His shoulders were wide and thick.

Paris was Evander's closest friend. They'd seen appalling battles together, one of which had cost Paris two fingers on his left hand.

The men were joined now by four more fighters, each wearing gold armbands: a young man and three women, one of whom had jammed that knife into Alger's arm. All were breathless.

Hunting was hard, and Alger's foot speed had exhausted them. But he was going to die now, and he knew it. Evander eyed him. "It's Alger, yeah?"

Alger just wheezed, absently noting the ring on Evander's left hand, a wedding band that had once belonged to Evander's father, making Evander the only soldier on either side of this war to defy his House's regulation about wearing jewelry. *All* metals belonged to the army. But Evander's father had worn this ring as a sign of devotion to his wife, just as Evander now wore it as a memorial to his parents. His answer whenever challenged about it was, "Anyone who wants to commandeer it from me is welcome to try."

Evander asked, "Who sent you to do this, Alger? Was it Rafe? Are you one of his lot?"

Alger just stared. Evander tried again. "Was that who ordered you here?"

Again, nothing. So Paris leaned in: "Hey, kid. What's it like to die as Rogue scum?"

At birth, every Rogue (and every Crown too) was inculcated into

the life of war by anyone tall enough to look up to. The enemy was made hateful. The stakes were ingrained. We fight or we die. Sometimes we fight *until* we die. In other words: *Never surrender, even if you're flat on your back with your face demolished. Keep demonstrating resolve. Make even your death discouraging for them . . .*

So it must've given Alger a moment of satisfaction to mumble, "D'know yet. What's it like to live as Crown rubbish?"

He'd never get to be a general. But sod these Crowns . . .

Evander smiled, then jammed a dagger into Alger's chest. A great gasp emitted from the body as it expired.

None of them knew it—how could they?—but they had just doomed, and *saved*, their country.

The rain fell, washing Alger's lifeless face. The stray dog barked. And the war went on. Evander felt nothing.

Home was home. It had to be defended.

And this much was doctrine, the one thing they *knew*, repeated by the bivouac fires in the Crown camp every night: If Crowns governed this island, there would be no more war. If *Rogues* governed it, there would be no more Crowns.

And so they fought. And they killed. And sometimes they died.

*Death death death death water water water water war war war war.*

Rafe raced breathlessly up Worthing Street fifteen minutes later and arrived at the common, a Rogue on Crown ground, armed and prepared for whatever might follow.

He discovered Alger's body—now lifeless and rain-washed. That always landed hard—losing a soldier in his command—and it left Rafe with traditions to honor; one required him to return the body to Rogue soil. He knelt down to gather it. But then he paused . . . Something was tugging at him.

*Grief.* Landing right behind his eyes.

Alger was just a kid. Dead now. That shook Rafe; he couldn't say why. He pulled a kerchief from his coat and gently wiped the blood off Alger's face, then began to pick the boy up, when, suddenly—

BANG. A slugger, fired from a distance, suddenly tore up mud an inch from Rafe's right knee. He looked up.

And there she was, in a window less than a hundred feet away.

*Jule.* Famous Jule. Pistol in hand. Aiming right at him.

The miss had been intentional—he knew that—a shot meant as a warning. And . . . a gesture of respect. It left him astounded. Not just because she could have fired again and did not.

More . . . by her *face*.

He'd never really *seen* her before; she'd always been coated in battle blood and hidden by layers of protective gear. But not today. Today, she was herself. Unvarnished. Human.

And beautiful. It was shocking. A kindness in her eyes. Warmth. Was that possible? Her mouth, her skin . . . lovely. Fierce, as always—but even from this distance, even with a gun in her hand, she was like gossamer. And he could see that there was a heart in there. It was deeply unsettling.

But hopeful too. Wonderful.

And she was, of course, sparing his life. That was treasonous. This beautiful warrior who had every reason and opportunity to kill him was simply choosing not to. His training told him to rise and flee, but he didn't move. He couldn't. His feet felt nailed to the earth. Instead, he nodded to her respectfully, gratefully, one soldier to another.

She half nodded back. That felt like hope too. A peaceful, unspoken promise. It was all utterly unfamiliar, un-military, and un-monstrous.

And Rafe was unafraid.

The moment hung forever—an unofficial truce. And though it was crazy to allow such an unholy thought, he'd never felt closer to another human being in his entire life. The air seemed like it was singing quietly to him. Humanity felt real. And it was all because of that soft, sweet face across the square. Madness.

Finally, Rafe grabbed Alger's body and stood. For a second, he remained entirely still, as if offering himself once again as a target.

Jule lowered her weapon and gestured for him to go. *I might kill you in battle*, the gesture seemed to say, *but it won't be today, not when you've come to retrieve one of your own*. Rafe breathed out a smile and carried the dead boy away from the common. Jule watched him go.

They both knew: a new kind of courage had just been born.