



Sarah had to jump to safety from her third-floor apartment. Below, the burned building.



## “I Escaped From a Deadly Fire”

Last year, Sarah Bolton woke up to find that her building was going up in flames. Here, the terrifying story of how she made it out of the blaze alive.

As told to Dina Roth Port

■ When I first heard about the fire that killed 99 people in a Rhode Island nightclub this past February, I was upset like everyone else. But I also felt an instant connection to those who were involved in the tragedy, even though I didn't know any of them personally. That's because the incident was a vivid reminder of the night in 2002 when I almost died in a fatal fire near my college campus. Seeing how many people perished in Rhode Island made me fully realize how lucky I was to have survived.

### a long winter night

In the winter of 2002, I was 21 years old and a junior at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. My friends Raechel, Virginia, and I had scored a great three-bedroom apartment on the third floor of a building called Campus Walk Apartments, where 33 other college kids lived. I was psyched to be on my own, and I was also doing well in school and going on three years with my boyfriend, Keith, a student who lived an hour and fifteen minutes away in Raleigh, North Carolina. Since Valentine's Day fell on a Thursday

that year, we planned to have a romantic dinner when he visited the following night. So on the evening of February 14, 2002, I hit the sack around eleven.

Around two-fifteen, Raechel woke up and saw a red glow coming from the living room, which our bedrooms surrounded. She got up to check it out and saw that our balcony was completely engulfed in flames. She burst into my room screaming “Sarah, wake up! There's a fire!” and then ran to wake Virginia. It's weird, but I didn't panic—my mind went blank and my senses became numb. I put on my shoes, grabbed my cell phone, and ran into the living room. As we stood there, flames shattered the balcony's glass door and raged into the room. It was obvious we didn't have much time to get out.

We knew that our two cats were somewhere in the apartment, but it was too dangerous to spend time looking for them. Everything was happening so quickly that I felt like I was on autopilot and hardly thinking at all. We had a clear path to the front door so we tried opening it, but the hallway was filled with smoke and flames so we slammed it shut. Trapped in the

apartment, we ran for Virginia's bedroom, which was farthest from the balcony. Raechel, who was screaming “Oh, my God” over and over, opened a window. Virginia shoved a towel under the door, and I called 911. When I reached an operator, she told me help was already on the way.

### the risk that saved my life

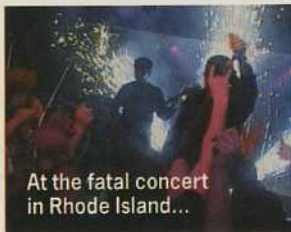
I got off the phone and leaned out the window and was shocked to see that the front of our building was blazing. People were gathering outside, and three men spotted us and yelled that we had to jump. I decided to go first. I crawled out on the window ledge, turned around, dangled down as far as I could, and then let go, falling the remaining 20 feet or so. The three guys cushioned my fall, basically letting me collapse on them. The wall right beneath our apartment wasn't on fire yet, so amazingly, my only injuries were a few scrapes.

I stood up and backed away to watch my roommates jump. They weren't quite as lucky as I was—Raechel bruised her tailbone, and we later found out that Virginia broke her collarbone and a rib. Meanwhile, the heat and stench of the burning building was becoming unbearable. Two of the guys scooped up Virginia—who screamed out in pain—and carried her while the rest of us ran toward the parking lot, where other tenants were standing in a huddle. When I turned around, I saw something I'll never forget: My building was an inferno. When I realized that our cats had died and that I'd lost everything, I started crying hysterically.

# SURVIVOR

Ambulances and fire trucks began to arrive, and I called my dad and Keith from a nearby pay phone (I'd lost my cell when I jumped) to ask them to come meet me at the hospital where Virginia and I were being taken. (Raechel had called her parents, who lived nearby, so she waited for them at the building.) At the emergency room, a doctor examined me. Then while Virginia was being treated, I sat by myself in the waiting area, sobbing and feeling like what had happened couldn't possibly be real. When my dad and Keith showed up an hour later, I was so relieved.

Later, Raechel and her parents arrived and broke the news that not everyone had made it out alive. I was devastated when I learned that the victims were the three girls who had lived directly across the hall from us—two were sisters—and one of their boyfriends. Apparently, they'd tried to get out by going through their front door and part of the building collapsed on them. It could so easily have happened to us if



At the fatal concert in Rhode Island...



...the crowd rushed one exit.



Ninety-nine people were killed.

## How to Survive

Memorizing the following safety procedures could save your life.

### When partying.

In nightclubs and bars, always check for the nearest exit—it's often *not* the one you entered. Most states require at least two exits in these venues.

### In big buildings.

"Learn the fire safety procedures and don't ignore drills," says Margie Coloian, public

affairs manager for the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), in Quincy, Massachusetts.

If there is a fire, crawl to the nearest exit, keeping your head close to the floor (smoke rises). Only open doors that are cool to the touch, and always close them behind you. If you are trapped, call 911.

### In a crowd.

Always stick to the outside so you can get to an exit faster. If you become stuck, don't push or yell. Focus on staying upright and breathing, says Paul Wertheimer, of Crowd Management Strategies in Chicago. If you fall, lie in the fetal position and cover your head to prevent injuries.

—ANURADHA KOLI

we hadn't turned back from the hallway and headed for the windows.

At about nine in the morning, my dad, Keith, and I drove to my building. There was an enormous gaping hole through the middle, the roof and stairwells were gone, and my apartment was completely gutted.

## recovering from disaster

The next week was insane. I took five days off from school to try to replace everything I'd lost. I stayed in a hotel for a few days, and then I moved into a new one-bedroom apartment where I lived for the rest of the year. Raechel and Virginia moved close by.

I was so busy those first few days that I never considered how the fire had started. So when I found out that it had been an act of arson, I was stunned. A 23-year-old female UNC graduate had climbed onto her ex-boyfriend's deck (which was directly below ours) while he was out for the night, doused a futon with lighter fluid, and set it on fire.

By the time I returned to school a week later, the buzz had quieted down. I was

glad, because talking about my experience was very difficult. My parents and friends helped by not asking too many questions, and Keith was supportive. Anytime I zoned out in the middle of a conversation, he'd hug me, which made me feel safe. The aftereffects continued though. I spaced out during class, had dizzy spells, and was often nauseated and depressed. The school suggested that anyone experiencing these symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) should get counseling, but I didn't think it would help me so I chose to try to deal on my own.

As time went on, I found that discussing it with Raechel made me feel better. She understood what I was going through. Then, in July, the woman who set the fire was sentenced to life in prison without parole. Slowly, the ordeal started to fade in my mind, and the nightmares and depression began to go away.

## one year later

But inevitably, there were more reminders. This past Valentine's Day marked the first

anniversary of the fire. Instead of spending a romantic evening at home, Keith and I went to where my building had stood. The site is now an empty lot. I placed four roses against the surrounding fence and thought about the students who had died.

Then, on February 21, I was watching television after my morning classes and saw the first reports from the fire in West Warwick, Rhode Island. Though I wanted to cover my eyes in horror, I couldn't stop watching the footage—I *had* to know every detail because the story hit so close to home.

In small ways, I'm still affected by that night—I cringe whenever a fire truck goes by—but I've also been able to move on. I'm enjoying my senior year. Raechel and I are living together again. We have two new cats and are on track to graduate. I'm still dating Keith, who continues to be an enormous source of strength. When I was standing in the parking lot watching my building burn, I thought I'd lost so much. But now I look back at that horrible night and know that I was actually *given* something: a second chance. ■