

# **Fire of Love**

Cassandra Poppe

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## Praise for *Fire of Love*

“*Fire of Love* is one of the best books I have ever read. It will dramatically stir the embers in your heart to a roaring flame of love. No burden, heartache, or catastrophe is too heavy or too much for God. Travel along with Cassandra Poppe and her son Fulton on an unforgettable journey of tragedy, pain, enduring love, redemptive suffering, and peace. Their pain was so intense, you might be tempted to close the book at times. However, I encourage you to hang tight to their hands and keep going. Cassandra beautifully unveils what lies beneath the shards and ashes to reveal an exquisite discovery of the ‘Fire of Love.’ She gently prods us, ‘Just keep your heart open to Him . . . and peace will eventually come.’ You will be changed for the better by reading this book. I guarantee it.”

~**Donna-Marie Cooper O’Boyle**, EWTN Host of several TV series, Speaker, Award winning author of more than twenty books including: *The Kiss of Jesus* and *Feeding Your Family’s Soul*.  
[www.donnacooperoboyle.com](http://www.donnacooperoboyle.com)

“I originally ‘met’ Cassandra through her writing in 2010 and have long admired her commitment to both her faith and her family. Since that January 2013 day that forever changed the Poppe family’s life, my profound respect for Cassandra and Jay Poppe has only grown and deepened. In *Fire of Love*, Cassandra recounts with gripping detail and heartrending emotion a devastating accident involving her precious young son Fulton and how her personal trust in God’s will enabled her to withstand circumstances that would bring most of us to the brink of devastation. This book moves beyond the story of Fulton’s tragic burning and into the realm of a spiritual treatise, examining both the ‘before’ and ‘since’ moments that have contributed to Cassandra’s passion for God and our Church. Along with way, you’ll meet one of my favorite superheroes, Fulton Poppe, and discover how God is calling each of us, even in moments of vulnerability, to find our own way to serve the world around us. Read this book not only to learn how one family has coped with the unthinkable and thrived, but how you too might ignite a fire of love in your own heart.”

~**Lisa M. Hendey**, Founder of CatholicMom.com and author of *The Grace of Yes*

“Most of the time we ask the question, ‘Why do bad things happen?’ Cassandra Poppe responds in her memoir, *Fire of Love*, with ‘How do we respond to the bad things—with love or despair?’ Her authentic, riveting, and often raw recollection of her son, Fulton’s fire accident is truly a universal story—of struggle, suffering, wrestling, love, and redemption. What the world needs sorely is hope in God’s mercy and unfailing love. Poppe delivers in a beautiful but honest way. Prepare your heart and soul to accept the message God has in store for you through her journey.”

~**Jeannie Ewing**, author of *From Grief to Grace: The Journey from Tragedy to Triumph*.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

Preface

Section 1: A Life Lived

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Section 2: Lessons Learned

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Epilogue

## About the Author

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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To all the souls throughout the world who selflessly offered us your precious time, treasures, and talents, and lifted us up in prayer and made our burdens light.

And most of all, to St. Louis de Montfort, St. Theresa of Avila, and Our Lady—for the conversion you worked so hard to begin in my heart, that I learn to love Our Lord with the wild abandon and trustful surrender He so rightly deserves.

God is good. Always!



## PREFACE

When I first began writing this book, it was merely a way for me to sort out all that had been revealed to me during the intense suffering that began that cold January day in 2013. But as I wrote, the beauty hidden beneath the pain was slowly revealed to me in a way that not only served as a balm to my soul, but to others as well.

No one can escape suffering. We must all carry our crosses throughout life. And when that journey ends, we have not relief but more suffering still. A crucifixion. A constant call to die to self for love of God. It is not an easy journey, this road to Calvary. But so very essential to our salvation.

Some have told me that, at times, my story was difficult to read. Especially for burn victims and their loved ones. And so out of a deep respect for all those who have suffered in similar ways, please read my story with care, as some of my memories may remind you of your own sufferings. It is not my intention to excite one's imagination with horrific details. Rather, I want to let my readers realize that no matter how intense the suffering may be, there is always hope and even joy to be found along the way to make such crosses infinitely easier to bear. And that God's great love rises victoriously above all trials that come our way.

I am by no means a theologian, nor am I a scholar. And the lessons I have learned are tainted by my human nature and perhaps sometimes my flawed interpretations. Therefore, I have relied on Scripture and the wisdom of the Saints to help me sort out some of the harder lessons and say things that I may not be able to express as well as they. Most quotes I have used are commonly attributed to the holy souls I cite throughout the book, although at times it has been difficult to find their original source. And while it certainly helps to know that a Saint has offered us these nuggets of wisdom, the words still ring true no matter from whose lips or pen they first came forth.

Fire of Love is not an academic study on suffering. Nor is it a prayer book for those seeking solace. It is simply a story of a little boy, his mother, and the infinite love of God Who loved them enough to show them a better way to suffer by not only accepting suffering but actually embracing it for all the good it holds, by accepting His permissive will as we endure indescribable agony with the childlike trust that in the end we might begin to understand how much He loves us.

Fire of Love is a profoundly personal story, yet touches on the universal truths in such a way that any suffering soul might find some comfort, if only they learn to trust. God wishes nothing more than the salvation of our souls. And so it is through this lens of love—of God's divine providence in our lives—that I offer this work to you in hopes that you will open your hearts to the possibility that whatever you are suffering or will suffer in the future, you will be assured that beneath the pain, He has hidden for you a glimpse of His marvelous love and the glories to come.

Thy will be done, Lord. Thy will be done.

## **Section 1**

### **A Life Lived**

## CHAPTER 1

*“For he is my God and my saviour: he is my helper, I shall not be moved.”  
—Psalms 61:8*

The sky hung gray over our farm, considering whether it would dampen our plans or let us be. As the clouds vacillated, an occasional breeze stirred, cold enough to remind us it was January but not so cold that it would freeze fingers and make for clumsy work. Regardless of the weather, though, our plans for the day were going forward.

“Hold still, wiggle worm,” I teased as I zipped up Fulton’s fleece jacket. “It is chilly outside.” He scrunched up his face with impatience as I finished my inspection. “Are you ready to help your daddy? It’s a big day!”

“Yep!” he grinned, proud at the prospect of spending the morning doing ‘men’s work.’ His blue eyes sparkled and his entire body was almost bursting with the kind of energy only a four-year-old boy can possess. I kissed his soft cheek, still smelling faintly of peanut butter and syrup—his favorite waffle topping.

“Get on out there!” I rustled his shaggy, ash blonde hair as he zipped away from me, his Lightning McQueen shoes making a soft *swoosh* sound as he headed to the front door. He was off to do men’s work that morning, gathering sticks for the burn barrel and watching my husband Jay and his older brothers catch and skin our chickens.

As the door shut behind Fulton, the life our family had led was also closed to us forever. Had I known that would be the last time I would see my son’s precious little face as it was, I would have taken the time for one last caress or a lingering gaze as he vanished from my sight. Or would I have even let him go outside at all? Perhaps, like Sleeping Beauty’s father, I would have whisked him away that day, removing all possible dangers from him, trying to desperately defeat that which was to come. But alas, ignorance was bliss and there was the sink and counters to sterilize, tubs of salted ice water to fill, towels and freezer bags ready and waiting. It was chicken processing day, and I was too busy with the practicalities of our project to worry about the dangers.

The moment Our Lord redirected our lives that fateful January morning, I felt it more than I heard it. That deep percussion-like boom one hears when a firework is sent skyward, before it explodes. This was immediately followed by Jay’s unintelligible cry.

Inwardly, I groaned as I saw patches of grass burning outside the window. *A grassfire. Lovely.* I paused a moment, deciding whether to continue on with my own preparations or poke my head outside.

Suddenly, Virginia, our 16-year-old daughter, burst into the kitchen. “Mom!” she screamed, “Fulton’s on fire!”

“What?!” Flying back to the window, I looked to the side and saw what will haunt me forever. My four-year-old little boy was slowly moving away from the burn barrel, completely engulfed in flames from his waist to his head. His hands were clenched at his sides, moving them up towards his face in slow motion, pieces of his fleece jacket peeling away and falling behind him.

I ran to the pantry door. *Stop, drop and roll. Stop, drop and roll. He doesn't know stop, drop and roll!* I was wearing a long, loose sweater. *Could I smother the flames with this flimsy cloth? Or would that catch on fire and add to his injuries? What do I do?*

I flung the door open. By then, Jay was already on top of our son, Fulton's terrified screams muffled beneath Jay's body. While living in the country has a multitude of benefits, one major drawback was the lack of immediate emergency services. We lived half an hour away from the nearest hospital, and depending on where the ambulance was, it could take almost that long just to get an ambulance to our home. How much time would Fulton have? "911 or drive him in?" I yelled, trusting Jay would know what was best.

"Call 911," he boomed back. "Now!"

"Mary, Mother of God, please help us!" I prayed aloud as I dialed the phone.

I will humbly admit, when I spoke on the phone, I was not as calm as I would have liked to have been. Rather, I was terrified. "My son is on fire!" I screamed. The operator calmly asked a few questions which helped me regain my composure, and somehow I was able to relay enough information to her to allow her to do her job.

I have a vague recollection of staying on the phone with her but I think that is more of an assumption than a memory. When Jay carried Fulton into the house, all my attention was immediately directed towards him. "Mom," Virginia came to me, "There is a man at the fire station. Should I go get him?"

That was a miracle in itself. We lived right across the street from the volunteer fire station, but no one was ever there unless they had a meeting or were gathering to go out on a call. "Yes! Go!" I directed.

Jay gently laid Fulton on the kitchen floor at my feet, then quietly receded from view.

Meanwhile Fulton was shrieking in terror, looking wildly around him, unable to focus on anything. The rest of his clothes had burned away. He was dressed only in his underwear, with what was left of his dark blue pants still around his ankles. He trembled with both fear and cold. The stench of gasoline, charred flesh and burnt hair assaulted my senses. I almost wretched.

The man from across the street appeared and someone directed my daughter to get a clean sheet. We laid the sheet on the floor and moved Fulton onto it. He was still panicking and repeated over and over again, "Mama, I don't want to be on fire anymore! I don't want to burn!" His cries drew my heart to his in an inexplicable way—as though we were two parts of a whole. I wept internally with him, but would not let him see.

I knelt on the floor in front of him as he sat, his knees pulled up to his chest, looking wildly into my eyes. Calm instantly washed over me. "Fulton, look at Mama." I repeated this a few times until our eyes met. "Fulton, you are not on fire anymore. Daddy saved you, honey. You are going to be OK." Every time his eyes left mine, he started to panic again, so I kept him focused.

"Can you feel my hand?" I placed it on his left knee, the only major part of him that didn't appear to be burned. "Just focus on the feeling of my hand, Fulton. This knee does not hurt, OK? Think about your knee." I don't know if any of that really helped him, but it made me aware how much of him was actually injured.

There was a large patch on his right calf that was severely burned with smaller burns here and there on his leg. When his clothes caught fire, the elastic waistband of his pants melted into his skin and his waistline looked like bubbling, ground up flesh. There were patches of burns on his chest, his sides and his entire left shoulder blade matched his waistline.

Crying, he raised his arms to me, asking me to hold him, but as he did so, long strands of burned flesh hung down from his forearms, wrists and fingers like a partially unwrapped mummy emerging from its grave. New terror struck him, and he started frantically pulling at his flesh. “What is that?!” he screamed.

“Honey,” my mother said from behind me, “I think those are just pieces of your burned shirt. Don’t pull on them, OK?”

*Thank you, Mom.* “That’s right, Fulton. Don’t pull on that right now. We can get that taken care of later.” But this new awareness of his burns caused him more anxiety. He needed to calm down. “Brave breaths, Fulton. Let’s do brave breaths!” He nodded and within just a few slow, deep breaths, our breathing was synchronized and he was calmer.

We invented brave breaths when he was a toddler because of his tendency to overreact to the normal cuts and scrapes of boyhood. Any time I had to clean a wound or remove a bandage, we would take brave breaths together to help him cope with the pain. This familiar coping mechanism would come to be a major help in his healing over the next few years, and I was so thankful we already had it in place.

As we were doing our brave breaths, I tried to keep him focused on my eyes. It was the first time I allowed myself to actually take in the damage to his angelic face. His eyes, miraculously, were unharmed, save for his singed eyelashes. He had used his fists to cover his eyes, and this instinct helped salvage most of his eyelids and the raccoon-like patches around each eye. But the rest of his face did not fare so well.

The front of his neck was mercifully spared, but the collar of his shirt burned through his skin from under each ear and all around to the back of his neck, even exposing what looked to be burned muscle under his right ear. His cheeks and nose were a patchwork of charred skin and large, bloody blisters, yet his forehead looked eerily perfect. For an instant, I was relieved. But as I looked closer, his perfect looking skin took on a nauseatingly cadaverous look and I worried more about that skin than the rest of his face. His ears had the same waxy, death-like gray color. I had never seen a second or third degree burn before, but knew what I was looking at was severe.

*I cannot even comfort him.* Any other day, any other wound, he would be cradled in my arms as I rocked him, stroking his hair and wiping his tears. But that day I dared not touch him anywhere but his knee, fearing if I caressed his face it would dissolve in my hands and he would be lost to me forever.

His head had patches of hair, curled and black at the ends, and smears of fluid filled blisters and oozing skin. *Oh Lord, look at his skin!* I tried for a moment to imagine what sort of care he would require. *What will this mean?* It was too much for me to process all at once, and so we continued with the brave breaths until help arrived.

I vaguely recalled the first responders entering our kitchen. A bag or two of medical equipment. Lots of movement. Walkie-talkies. But for me, I was completely engrossed in watching my son’s eyes. For the first several minutes they were wild with panic—darting to and fro, full of life and fight. But slowly the clearness of his eyes seemed to give way to a thick, dull coating and his eyes went from blue to gray. *Don’t leave me, Buddy!*

One of the first responders immediately got down on the floor with us and began talking to him. “May I say a prayer for your son?” she asked. I nodded, thankful for her presence of mind and her ability to put into words that which I could not. “Fulton,” she smiled, “I am going to say a little prayer with you, OK?”

Up until that moment, all I could say inside was, “Dear Lord, please help him. Save my Fulton. Mother Mary, pray for us.” I could go no further than those short yet powerful prayers. Later, I would learn, there would be plenty of time for longer prayers. But for that moment, my simple cries for help would be enough. And while the words and tone of this woman’s prayer were unfamiliar to me, I knew our hearts were lifted up to Our Lord in complete union.

Finally the ambulance arrived. The rest of the first responders wheeled the stretcher in and they gently laid Fulton upon it. By this time, he had grown much quieter, and only mildly protested as they moved him and made him lie down. As soon as the 911 dispatcher understood what the emergency was, she had immediately called for helicopter transport. And by this point, the chopper was already waiting for us just a few miles down the road on a school playground. They had to move quickly, the medics explained, before he went into shock.

“Mom, you’re coming with us,” one of the paramedics said as the last of the safety belts were in place. My mother had already gathered a few things—granola bars, a packet of Kleenex, \$20, and her cell phone. Virginia knew to grab my rosary and had everything ready for me in a bag. The wheels bumped and the stretcher rattled as they swept him out of the house and down the porch steps.

For the first time since I saw Jay laying my son at my feet, I searched out my sweet husband. He was pacing in our living room, arms held up and away from his body as if surrendering. His clothes were burned and I could see his hands and arms were scorched. Our eyes met as I came to him, and he just shook his head. Tears streamed down both our cheeks. I caressed his face in my hands and kissed his lips, as he whispered, “No. Just . . . no.”

“I love you,” I whispered.

He turned his face away, trembling.

“I love you,” I said again.

Still unable to meet my gaze, he rasped, “Be with him. Go!”

I ran to the waiting ambulance, shaken by the state Jay was in but unable to do anything for him. The plan was for my mother to take him to the nearest hospital in Arkansas for treatment and they would make the three hour trip to Tulsa as soon as he was released. Meanwhile, our 18-year-old son Ryan would follow the ambulance to the where the helicopter waited and take me to Tulsa once they took off. Virginia, Shannon, CJ and Marialina would remain at home until they could be taken to Tulsa with Jay later that day.

With the basic plans laid, we headed to the school. I rode in front with the driver but longed to be with my son. No specific prayers came to me at that point, rather fragments of my faith that came to my mind, sent from my heart as pleas to Heaven. *Jesus, Mary, Joseph . . . Please help us. Fulton Sheen, please save my son . . . Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help or sought thy intercession was left unaided . . . Thy will be done.*

Suddenly, one of the paramedics banged on the partition behind my head. The ambulance stopped. “Don’t worry,” the driver soothed, “they are just trying to stabilize him.” Somehow these words did not offer me the comfort he was trying to convey. And so the prayers continued.

*To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve. To thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears . . .*

The medic banged on the partition again, signaling that it was safe to move, and we continued on our journey. As the prayers flowed from my lips, I was inexplicably reassured. *You’ve got this*, I told myself. *You have been preparing for this. The Lord will see us through.*

*Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee . . . I believe in God, the Father Almighty*

*Yes. I believe in God.*