

The storm this morning proved to be all bluster, a promise unfulfilled, charcoal clouds burned away and now only ashes on the horizon. The tree we're sitting under fractures the light into a mosaic on our skin, but the shadow that crosses Alice's face has nothing to do with the sun.

"Cia," she says. "I have to tell you something, but you have to promise not to be mad."

Somebody shrieks, and I look across the quad. The jocks own the middle of the courtyard, mostly seniors like us but with the grace and strength (and social skills) of apex predators claim-ing their space at the default center of attention. Cheyenne's cry dissolves into giggles as Darius holds her up for a few overhead presses before swinging her back down to her feet with elegance and complete indifference to the fact that he just flashed the whole senior class her panties.

A couple of the jocks catch my eye, and we exchange subtle nods—I'd had a place at that table once, when I obliterated the state record for the 1500-meter run my sophomore year. I don't run track anymore, but I still own my place at the top of the leaderboard. Not that I care, but it keeps me out of the prey category when the jocks start looking down the food chain for entertainment.

One gaze lingers longer than the others: Judah Hayes, fellow ex-track geek. My retirement had been served up last fall by an ACL tear courtesy of endless shuttle run drills and the joy of spending six months in physical therapy. Judah stopped running two months ago, when his twin brother went missing and Judah stopped doing *everything* besides looking for Noah. There is something heavy and helpless in my chest as I watch him watching us. It must be a little like waking up one morning and finding the mirror empty. Or like your shadow is gone, no matter where you stand in the sunlight. Judah has only been back in school for a couple of weeks, and the sovereigns of Summerset High closed ranks protectively around him the second he walked through the double doors. Whether that was from genuine empathy, I couldn't say. Maybe it was just a carnivorous desire to be closer to the bleeding meat, the way some people get when they catch a whiff of tragedy.

From where I sit, I can see that Judah's wavy brown hair probably hasn't had anything more hygienic than his fingers through it in the past week, and his lean runner's frame is harder than it used to be. More sharp angles. He's a tree without leaves and out of season. There is no mistaking the look on his face: he doesn't want to be here. But equally clear by the intensity of his stare: for some reason, he *really* wants to know what we're talking about.

Come to think of it, *I* really want to know what we're talking

about. I lob my wadded-up lunch bag into the trash and brush crumbs off my jeans. “What’s up?”

“Okay.” Alice exhales as if I’ve just given her permission to breathe. “I’ve been looking into the fire.”

I go still. “Why?” I don’t need to ask which fire. She means *my* fire. The Fire with a capital F.

“I don’t think it was an accident.”

“Why are you thinking about it at all?”

“Cia.” She takes my hands. Her brown fingers are smooth against the patchwork of scars stitched into my skin. “I know you don’t want to hear this. But there’s so much more to the story.”

I wore compression gloves for all of kindergarten and half of first grade, keeping my grafted skin pliable and marking me as different even among the glue-eating, booger-picking crowd. My hands are hypersensitive in places even now, twelve years later. The nerve endings haven’t forgotten. I feel Alice’s touch all the way into the bone.

I feel her words even deeper. “It isn’t a *story*.”

“I know. I didn’t mean it like that. But I don’t . . .” She draws a deep breath. “I don’t think it was an accident like they said.”

The sandwich I’d eaten turns to lead in my stomach. I take my hands back. “An accident? An accident is when a bunch of random bullshit crashes together. What happened back then was no accident. My bio dad was a sick, crazy person who thought God wanted him to cook bonedust, and our house blew up because he wasn’t very good at it, and my mom died, and my sisters died, and that’s it. There’s no *story* there, Alice. Not one that hasn’t been told a hundred times before.”

“I know.” Her voice is a whisper of an apology, but not the kind of apology that means she’s going to stop. “But who was buying the drugs, Cia? We’ve both watched enough Netflix

documentaries to know that there are no lone wolves in that world. He had to have been connected. Who was financing him?"

Alice has wanted to be the next Nellie Bly since she joined journalism club freshman year. I think her first word must have been *Why?* But she's never turned that laser focus on me. It's why I sat at her table in kindergarten—she was the only one who thought my jumbo sixty-four-count box of Crayolas was more interesting than my shiny gloves and robot leg.

"Look. I should have asked you before I started digging, but cross my heart and hope to die, I was looking at something else entirely." Her eyes are all aching sincerity. I wonder what mine are.

"Noah."

Her fingers curl in the empty space where mine had been. "Noah."

"He broke up with *you*, Alice. You don't owe him anything." It comes out sharper than intended—as if I don't know all about wounds that refuse to heal.

Hurt flickers across her face. "I know that."

"Does Judah know what you're doing?"

She doesn't look at him. "Listen to me, Cia. Noah isn't the only kid who went missing this year in Summerset, not by far. I found eleven more just in public records. But the Hayes family was the only one that got any publicity at all."

"What does Noah have to do with my fire?"

"Nothing. Not . . . directly." She blows a curl off her face in frustration. "Except bad things happen to kids here, and no one gives a shit."

Alice has always been fanatical about ethics in journalism. And everywhere else, for that matter. I know that, and the words come out anyway. "So, is this your big in for Emerson? Trading on your friends' personal tragedies for your admission portfolio?"

She flinches. But she doesn't back down. "I'm telling you because it's the right thing to do, Cia. I'm not asking permission." She leans closer, speaks quieter. "There are a lot of unanswered questions about the night of your fire, questions that never got asked in the first place. Why is that? If your—" she pauses. "If John Bennett was the Walter White of Summerset, why didn't they find any paraphernalia in the rubble? Why were all of the doors locked from the outside? And why—"

The wetness on my cheek surprises us both, I think.

"You deserve the truth more than anyone," Alice says quietly. "Cia . . . Do *you* remember why the doors were locked?"

*Hush now. Everything is going to be all right.*

The voice of a mother I don't remember breathes smoke into my ear, my lungs, and there isn't enough oxygen in the quad for both of us—me and this memory I didn't ask for.

I haven't answered Alice's question. Whatever she sees in my face must tell her I'm not going to.

"Did you know there were over three hundred house fires in Summerset that year? That's almost double the national average for a town our size. But almost none of them made the papers. Doesn't that seem strange to you? Even yours barely got a mention, and three kids di—" She stops, but it's way too late to unsay it.

*Three kids died. I was supposed to be number four. "Why are you doing this?"*

"Because kids disappear and nobody in this town misses a beat. Because kids *die* and nobody asks the right questions. Or *any* questions. Because something is really wrong with Summerset, Cia, and I think your family was involved."

*Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles.*

"Just hear me out."

*Close your eyes, sweetheart. It's time to fly.*

I am ash, weightless and gray. I float up and away from her.  
“Don’t walk away, Cia. Please.”

I’m not walking. The wind has taken me, and I don’t know where I’m going.

Away.

“You’re not the only one with secrets, you know!”

I do know. But the wind is carrying me away, away from my best friend, away from the quad, down a hallway to a class I won’t pay attention to, because for the first time in more than ten years, my leg hurts. The leg I haven’t had since I was five, and the fire took it and everything else away.



*Pause.*

*Play.*

That was yesterday. My phone says 07:42.

**alice.books113 15:36**

we have to talk.

**alice.books113 15:55**

i know you’re mad. this is important.

**alice.books113 16:18**

whatever you think you know, don’t trust it. trust me.

**alice.books113 16:19**

i wouldn’t hurt you.

Between then and now, Alice reached out to me seventeen times—four calls and thirteen Snapchat messages.

**alice.books113 16:21**

will you just hear me out?

**alice.books113 17:05**

come on, cia. we're better than this.

**alice.books113 19:06**

i can't do this alone. i need you.

Between then and now, Alice drowned in the quarry.