



***Frost On
My Pillow***

***Fire Bringer Series,
Book 1***

Leah Hamrick

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The Fire Bringer Series Book One

By: Leah Hamrick

Dedication

To Jon and Khloey

Preface

Pain is the only thing I see.

Pain is as much an emotion as it is a feeling. There's a difference between breaking ones leg and finding out someone has stabbed you in the back and betrayed you. Honestly, I prefer the first one. Physical pain only affects you for so long before it dissolves into the sea of nothingness. It's forgotten about, and you move on with your life.

Emotional pain will always stay with you, and lingers at the back of your thoughts until the end of your days. You may forgive the person, but the pain is still there. What's the saying? I may forgive, but I won't forget.

The pain will rob you of happiness, and all other pretty emotions. Pain will be the one to break you down in the end.

And for me, that's exactly what happens...

Chapter One

Lyla

“One’s dignity may be assaulted, vandalized and cruelly mocked, but it can never be taken away unless it is surrendered.” —Michael J. Fox

My wedding is weeks away. I may only be seventeen, but that is pretty much the norms for us here. Our partners are chosen for us at birth by the city’s Council men and women. We don’t have much say in it. As long as we reproduce to keep our kind going, no one cares about how unhappy we are. I’ve even known some girls who have committed suicide as a result. Others have to be put on depression pills to keep themselves sane.

For me, I at least love the person I’m set to marry. I mean, I think I do. His name is Tanner, and he has blond hair that could blind you if stared at in the sun too long. I mean, it’s so bright you could probably get a tan just by standing next to him.

He also has the brownest eyes anyone will ever see. They look almost black, and the change in light never seems to lighten them. They look like giant pools of warm mud. Sexy pools of mud, but whatever.

Tanner towers over me; he is a staggering six-foot-seven. I on the other hand, am a small five-foot-four. It can get really awkward looking at someone who seems to be as tall as the Sears Tower in Chicago. I can only imagine how weird it will be when we finally kiss. He’s going to have to bend way down just to reach my lips.

We live in a place that is set in strong magic so no one can stumble across it. I mean, what we refer to as the Summer Solstice is actually a park in Toledo Ohio. Our town is camouflaged so no one on the outside can see it.

Even if *I* happened to go out, I wouldn't know how to get back in because of course, I don't know the magic words to get the gateway to appear. I've heard that if someone looks at our town, they won't see anything, but trees, trees, and more trees. Oh, and maybe a deer or two.

Something in the illusion also keeps outsiders from coming close to the entrance. I guess it's some sort of persuasion that keeps them away. I don't know how our people did it, and I didn't want to know. The fewer questions you ask here, the better.

Our little town is full of strong fire magic.

And we are the Fire Bringers.

The Fire Bringers are beings with fire powers. I can spit fire; make fire balls with my bare hands, among other stuff. Everyone has their own unique abilities. When we went to school, we always had a few hours filled with fire training. We learned how to control it, among other things. I graduated in the eighth grade, because that's as far as our school goes here.

The Summer Solstice is much like any small town, except it could be misread as Salem Massachusetts from back in the 1850's. Everything is old, and creaky, and smells like rotten hay. I should be used to it by now, but I can't help wondering what it would be like to get out of this place and live in the city. I've seen pictures in books, and heard stories about the outside from friends who were brave enough to risk leaving.

We can leave to get onto the other side of the veil of magic, but it's actually called... Well, I don't remember what it's called, but if you get caught leaving, you will be hung. No mercy. That's why I've always been careful to avoid the guards at the opening.

But one day, hopefully Tanner and I can head out and get as far away from here as possible. I've brought up the possibilities with him, and he was all for it, so I hope he still wanted to depart from here.

I made my way across the small creek, over to my friend Lacy's house. I really enjoyed being at her place, because I felt safe there. When I'm home, all I ever do is get pushed around by my step-dad. He hates me for some reason. I've never done anything to him, but seriously, the *hate* radiates off of him in such strong waves it leaves me breathless.

He abuses me... all the time.

I've went to the City Council about it to file a complaint, and they are always more than happy to come check out the situation, but when they leave, they always look stone-faced and kind of robotic.

I guess that's just the effect my step-dad has on them. I mean, they want us females to reproduce, but they do nothing to help me, nor do they give me any other options or advice on what to do. I didn't know why they believed my step-dad over me, because I had all of the burns, cuts, welts, and bruises to prove he hurts me on a daily basis. I'd even cried and ended up latching on to Mr. Thomas's pant leg, begging him to help me when he left my house, but he acted as if I wasn't hanging off of his leg, being dragged across the ground like a rotten two-year-old having a tantrum.

I shook my head to get rid of the thoughts, and moved a little faster, passing row after row of small cottages and farm yards filled with spoiled, smelly animals. I say the animals are spoiled because the children usually bring vegetables and fruits from their own gardens to give them when they pass by.

I got lucky—my family doesn't own any smelly cows, horses, sheep, goats, camels, or buffalo—but, we *do* have about a dozen chickens in a small chicken coop near the back of our property. It's my job to feed them and to keep the coop clean, as well as it is my job to collect the eggs in the morning.

We had an acre of land that was mostly filled with tons of berry bushes. From blueberries to raspberries to gooseberries, we have them all, and we take them to the market to either sell, or trade with others in the community.

Everyone here has to do something to contribute to the town. My mom decided to grow berries and raise chickens. When I get married, Tanner and I will get our own house, and then *I* will have to decide what I want to do.

Tanner will have to take the paper to the Counsel, and get the work approved, and then everything will be provided for. If I want horses, I will get them. If I want cows, I will be given a male and female so they can mate and have a calf. Therefore, there will be milk for me to sell, and use to raise my family.

I picked up my pace when Lacy's house was in view, and then started a slow jog until I was rushing into her arms.

She kissed me on the cheek, and I pulled back to look at her. She had two braids on either side of her head, and was wearing a frilly white blouse with a long, beautiful silk skirt that was black and flowed in the wind like it weighed nothing. It was like water cascading over the rocks in the small stream that I just passed.

She tugged on a blond braid. "So, did you ask your mom if you can stay the night tonight?" Lacy asked, ushering me into the house, immediately lighting a lantern.

We had electricity, but a lot of the families liked to stick with the old ways and didn't use it. Me on the other hand, couldn't survive without it. Yeah, sure, I'm positive the technology in the outside world was significantly more advanced compared to what we had, but I'm content. I didn't know how many fancy gadgets I would be able to take. I'd read enough to know, somewhat, of what is available to people in the things called "*malls and online*".

I sat on the small couch, and folded my hands into my lap. Shoot, I totally forgot to tell my mom I wouldn't be home tonight. I shook my head, and Lacy gave me a "really?" look. "But I'm sure it will be fine, she has never had a problem with it before."

"Yeah, I just don't want you to get into trouble," she said, resting a hand over her large, ballooning stomach.

Lacy got married a little over a year ago, and was expecting her first child. I didn't think she and her husband James really loved each other, but they seemed to like each other enough, considering she's pregnant.

I'd always wondered about babies and men. *How does it happen? What does a guy look like naked? Why do women have breasts and guys don't?* We don't get taught how babies are made in school, or even at home, for that matter. We don't really learn about that until we are married, and when we *do* finally learn about it, we are *never* supposed to talk about it with the un-married.

I guess the guys know what to do, and the female is always sort of clueless about it until the time comes. I mean, why do freaking *guys* get to know about this stuff and us girls don't? It isn't fair, but who am I to question the rules around here?

It's kind of funny, I think I used to know what went on between a man and a woman, but my mind just can't bring it up. I think I was developing one of those conditions where you couldn't remember anything anymore. I know that kids at school had to of talked about it sometime.

I rolled my eyes.

"I won't get in trouble." I scoffed, waving my hand in the air in a "no big deal" gesture. "Have a little faith in me. I'm sure my step-dad will be glad to be rid of me for the night." Change of topic. "Anyway, how is the baby?"

She smiled widely and got up, waddling over to the kitchen to pour some tea. "It's good! I really would like to know if I'm having a boy or girl. It's so horrible to wait,

Lyla, you don't even understand! The anticipation is *killing* James and me. Why can't we have one of those fancy machines from the outside world that takes those pictures of the baby, and lets parents know the gender?" She grabbed the teapot and began pouring the boiling water, when she suddenly dropped it to the floor—causing it to shatter, throwing white porcelain all over the floor.

Shit.

I jumped up from the couch, and make it to her just in time to gently lower her to the floor before she starts convulsing, going into a full-blown seizure. I make sure she's on her back before the tremors come stronger. I close my eyes and pray for her to be alright. I touched her belly, and felt the stirring from the baby even from the contractions spreading through Lacy's body.

When it's over, I go get a wet rag for her face. Lacy has always had seizures, and no one will give her any medication to help them. The older she got, the worse they get.

Geez, I was so worried about her being alone because what if she has one and lands on her stomach or something?

I shivered just thinking about it. I don't know how strong the female stomach is to hold a baby. The pictures of Lacy's baby being squashed in her belly are sickening, and I retch into the sink, fighting back a whimper.

"Lyla?" Lacy whispered. "I don't feel so good."

I turned to her, wiping my mouth. "I know. I know. What do you need me to do? Would you like something to eat? Drink? Or how about I run you a nice bath? Or, I could always—"

She let out a weak laugh, stopping me from speaking. "You're rambling again, Lyla."

Tears filled my eyes. "I don't like seeing you like this. I've known you my whole life, you're practically my sister. I love you. I know you don't think it's such a big

deal to have seizures because you've had them for so long, but that doesn't mean it is okay."

She sat up, and her shirt rose, showing off her big, swollen stomach. Her skin had about one-hundred stretch marks all over, and I winced.

I hesitantly touched one. "Do these marks hurt?"

She shook her head, and I helped her stand when she gives me her hand. She wheezed and rubbed her back, gasping in pain. "No, they don't, but my back sure does. Lyla, when you have a baby, make sure you don't overwork yourself."

"I won't." I promised her. When another thought came to mind, I voiced it, not even caring that the topic shouldn't be spoken aloud. "What do a man and woman do together, Lacy?"

Lacy bit her lip and smiled. "You know I can't talk about that... Just wait, once you and Tanner are married, I'm sure he will teach you everything you need to know. The only thing I can tell you is that you will like it."

"But I want to know now! What if I don't *want* to do whatever it is?" I asked loudly. "What if I *don't* like it?"

She plopped into a cream-colored kitchen chair, breathing heavily. "You will have to, Lyla. You don't have a choice. You know what happens to us if we don't have babies... We go to work as slaves, and nothing you say will change their minds."

My lower lip trembled. I really didn't want to be forced to do anything. I wasn't ready to do anything... ever... I want... Who cares what I want? No one here cares! I bite the inside of my cheek, and dropped the subject. I wasn't getting anywhere with Lacy, so there was no point in wasting my breath.

"Hey, you know I would tell you if I could... You *know* this, Lyla. I don't like keeping secrets from you, but what if someone knows I told you, and they hurt my baby? I'm sorry, but I can't risk it. When you're married, we will

speak of it then, but until then, please don't ask me, because it really, really hurts me to keep things from you."

She was right, like always. I didn't want to put her baby in jeopardy, or her husband. It wouldn't be fair. If I was in her shoes... no, I would still tell her, because I would feel that she had the right to know what was going to happen to her.

I just nodded, and left it at that. My stomach rumbled, and I put my hand to it. Lacy gave me a knowing look.

"Hungry?" she asked, moving to get out of the chair.

"I am, but I can get my own food. Do you want anything?" I asked, standing up. "Lacy, please sit down." Lacy always wants to overdo it after she has a seizure, she doesn't know enough to rest and slow the heck down. Sometimes she needs to sleep after them, but other times she just feels really sick, and can continue on with what she is doing. She is a strong girl, and she wants everyone to know it.

"Lyla, sit your ass down. You are in *my* house, and *I* will be the one to wait on you, got me? Now *sit down!*" She moved over to the ice chest. For the people that don't have electricity, they can purchase ice bags to keep their food cold at the market.

She lifted up the lid, and took out a jar of goat cheese. She waved it at me. "Cheesy potatoes and cheese and tomato flatbread... Or..." She went to the counter and uncovered her vegetables, looking them over. "Cucumber and watercress sandwiches and strawberries."

Mmm... How could I pass that up? "Uh, you can make the potatoes and flatbread if you want, it sounds really good." My mouth watered. Lacy makes the best cheesy potatoes around. All she uses is those small finger potatoes, milk, goat cheese, garlic, and salt and pepper. But

sometimes, if she's lucky to have extra onions, she adds those in.

I watched Lacy cook for over thirty minutes. She looked so tired, but she never sat down. Her stomach was so big that it got in her way, but every time I moved to help her, she would glare at me. I really didn't want her to burn any holes into my outfit. Lacy is known to lose control of her powers when she is angry or upset, and her fire just goes flying in every which direction.

About ten minutes later, Lacy brought a big bowl of potatoes over and a whole tray of flatbread. As soon as she handed me my fork, James came into the house, and he smiled when he saw me. He unlaced his work boots, and tossed them over to the door messily.

Lacy growled at him.

"Hey, there's my favorite little munchkin! Staying for dinner?" he asked me.

"Yeah, and I'm staying the night." I said as I speared a gooey-with-cheese-potato, popping it into my mouth.

James went over to Lacy and gave her a kiss, then rubbed her belly.

I've known James as long as I have Lacy, so I'm pretty comfortable around him, but what happened next was completely out of my control—I had no idea what possessed me to speak. "James, can I ask you something, and do you promise to answer me without lying?"

He broke off a piece of his flatbread, causing tomato juice to roll down his fingers. He and Lacy shared a long look. "Yes, I promise. What is it?"

I mouthed sorry at Lacy, and then turned to James to speak. "What do a man and woman do together in bed? How are babies made?"

James started choking on his food, but managed to swallow it. "It's called sex, Lyla. Okay, you see, a man has

a...” He lowered his voice to a whisper, and told me the basics. He showed me with his fingers what happens.

At least I knew the mechanics of it. See! At least *someone* is honest with me. He even told me things people can do with their mouths and tongues. He described stuff to me in a way that made me want to try some of it...

I liked experimenting.

The thoughts that came to mind made me smile like I was up to something. Maybe I could do this...

“James! You’re not supposed to say anything!” Lacy bellowed, glaring at him, causing smoke to rise from her nostrils at an alarming rate.

He ducked his head and shrugged his shoulders. “So? She has the right to know. This town is whack.”

Lacy sighed.

James smiled triumphantly.

My heart soared now that I finally had a somewhat decent answer.

A few hours later, Lacy and James were ready to turn in for the night. I decided that I was going to go for a walk, and then come back. They said they’d keep the door open for me, which I appreciated. I didn’t feel like having to knock on their bedroom window and wake them up, just so they could come and open the door for me.

I shoved my shoes on and headed out into the night air. I breathed deeply, enjoying the crisp scent of fall. I smiled, and headed down the cobblestone path, and onto the main road. I didn’t know where I was going, but I didn’t care. Crickets chirped, toads croaked, and owls hooted. It was like a symphony, and it was so relaxing and peaceful I could have fallen asleep standing up if I really wanted to. Nothing good would come of that, though, only a concussion, oh, and maybe slight brain damage.

I looked around at all of the different shops and things on the main road. We had a library, hospital, school, a bakery and coffee shop, a tailor, a fabric shop, two small diners, a place where they sell herbs and potions, a pharmacy, a spiritual shop, and small stands where they sold dairy products, fish, and other things. One of the Council people drove past, but other than that, the road was empty. I really wished I was allowed to drive a car, but the normal people, like me, aren't allowed.

Thoughts of my upcoming wedding played in my mind, and my mood turned foul. I kicked a rock, and groaned softly.

I stopped walking, and put my hands onto my face. I really, really didn't want to get married. I didn't want this life. I wanted something more, and I wanted to marry a man that I knew for sure that I loved. Tanner is... Tanner, I guess. He is my friend, and I don't consider him as a lover... yet. Maybe someday I would.

I passed houses that were totally dark, letting me know the occupants turned in for the night. Other houses had windows open so wide I could see whole families sitting around tables, laughing, or playing cards and reading aloud to each other. Some I could see lit fireplaces; others were baking bread for breakfast in the morning. I sighed, and picked up my pace. I would never have a happy family like that... or should I say, I've never *had* a family like that. Who knows what the future held. Sometimes, I don't think I belong here... actually, I don't. I want to leave and never return. I wish we had a choice. I wish we had a choice of who to marry.

“Lyla?”

I turned around.

God, speaking... er... *thinking* of the devil.

Tanner.

“Lyla, honey-pot, why are you out wandering around? It’s past midnight.” His tall figure came strolling up to me, and I opened my arms for a hug.

I latched onto him, and tightened my hold. I thought about what James said, and I knew I could probably do something like that with Tanner. I knew he would be careful with me... just seeing him made me change my mind slightly.

“I could say the same about you. What are *you* doing?” I asked in a playful tone.

He smiled. “Just taking a nighttime stroll. You know, I haven’t seen you in a few days. I’ve missed you.”

“I missed you too. Did you want to join me for a walk? I could use the company.”

“Sure, I would love to.”

I really think Tanner loved me. He loved me more than a friend. I looked up at him, and it was hard to make out his features, but I could tell he was still smiling.

I wasn’t.

The next evening, I returned home. My mom didn’t say anything about me never telling her where I would be going last night. In a way, I don’t think she cared. As long as I came back safe and sound, to hell with everything else.

Whoo-hoo, good mom there.

I looked around my room, and thought it was rather plain. I had a small bed, a dresser, and a nightstand and lamp. Nothing more, only a few odds and ends that I had hidden under my bed, let’s say, like my diary, and a few jars of blueberry jam, and an old doll that I found in the back of our yard behind a tree. Her head fell off, but all’s good. I’d named her Deena.

My house was nothing spectacular. The outside was made of stone; all of the floors inside were old, scuffed up wood that had seen better days, and the walls were a mix

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