

FIREKEEPER

a novel

KATLÏA



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book was written during the pandemic while we were collectively on lockdown. As a result, there is a solemn melancholy throughout the story that meets moments of light. The main character, who is intermittently a version of myself from a life I no longer recognize and an amalgamation of many other people, suffers from agoraphobia. I wrote the harsh truths of a complicated character that cannot be defined or judged because, in one way or another, we are all Nyla. We all have an inner child that needs love.

For those who are sensitive to disturbing details of sexual exploitation and abuse, I want to caution you that this book has difficult moments of truth. While in the crux of writing this book, I found it very hard to separate myself from Nyla. Having to put my energy into the inner workings of her reality was not easy, but sometimes we have to go into the darkness to find the light. I needed to write about the experiences I have had and about the people I have encountered in my own journey in a way where I had control over the situation and could disassociate from those experiences in a healthy way. Not all experiences are my own. This is a work of fiction; however, some events and characters within are inspired by those I have crossed paths with throughout my life and I have gone to great lengths to protect their identity — even those who have hurt me. The characters in this book are not a depiction of any one person.

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This book is a love story but not in the way you would imagine. It is a reflection of self, a search for inner wisdom, a connection to community; it is a journey back to ourselves through understanding that the very elements that can destroy us can also heal us, from fire to water to the very essence of what it means to truly love ourselves and others. This book is about letting go of what does not serve us. It was written for those who seek comfort in knowing we are much more than who or what the world tells us we are.

EXCERPT



ONE

I used to live on the first floor of an old apartment building named after one of the first northern explorers who froze to death out on the ice, trying to make it to the top of the world. If only he knew how to make a fire to survive. It wasn't the cold that killed him and his men though. It was the scurvy. One of the only memories I have of my grandfather was when he told me the crew became zombies after the boat sank. He said they looked like the walking dead, and no one would open their doors to them for fear they might catch a disease.

It was just me and my mother, stuffed into a tiny one-bedroom apartment back then.

It feels like so long ago now. Like another life.

My bedroom was in the storage room. I had no window, just a loud, folding, sliding plastic door off the hallway. It looked more like one of those instruments ... what are they called? An accordion. Yes. A giant accordion.

My mom and I had just moved from a smaller community further north, a town close to where the explorer's boat sunk. My grandfather said that the people in the community knew exactly where the boat was all along, but the researchers that came looking for it every summer never listened to the locals and made up their own search instead.

When the boat was eventually found, it was because the researchers finally listened to the people in the community who led the researchers straight to it. Somehow, they still found a way to publish their own names in the papers, taking all the credit for finding it.

They left out the names of the locals, great hunters like my grandfather, who pointed it out to them. Their names were too hard to pronounce, I guess.

Now that I'm older, I've learned that's usually how it works in the North. People from out of town come up, name and claim things for themselves and call it discovery even though they are uncovering things that are not theirs to find or keep. Things that have already been "discovered."

My mom and I moved to Coppertown, the capital of the North, after my dad put her in the hospital. She was medivaced to Coppertown because her arm was broken so badly that the bottom half of it disconnected from her elbow and hung low towards her knee. She told me he had been holding me hostage the night it happened, after he kicked my mom out of the house. With no shoes on in the dead of winter, she had to run to the neighbour's house for help. I don't remember. I was only a toddler at the time. Apparently the only two police officers in our small community stood outside our rundown house in minus-fifty for hours, trying to get him to come out with his hands up. The officers had to take turns warming up in their idling police car.

I don't know why he did it, but my mom told me that when they finally got him to surrender, they found me watching cartoons and drinking my baby bottle full of pop, unaware of what was happening all around me. I'm just thankful my teeth didn't completely rot and fall out from the endless refills of sugary drinks.

My mom got pins in her elbow and had her arm in a cast. When the cast finally came off, her arm was permanently stuck in a bent position because she refused to do her physiotherapy.

Our small town didn't have a women's shelter at that time, even though it was much needed and still is. Domestic violence runs rampant in isolated places. When in Coppertown we were put up in a shelter and the workers helped my mom find a job and an apartment where we lived until I eventually left home if you want to call it that.

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After we moved into the apartment when we left the shelter, my mom was never home long enough to spend time with me. I had the entire apartment to myself most of the time. Sick of staring at the wall in my small bedroom, it didn't take me long to find the crawl space underneath my bed.

A place to leave the world behind if only for a little while.

I often hid in there. Away from my mother. She was an angry drunk and even angrier sober.

I began to wonder if my father was as bad as she made him out to be. Maybe he had been trying to protect me from her the night he broke her arm. Maybe she had slipped and fallen on the ice. Had the police ever thought of that? I didn't want to believe he would hurt anyone. I wanted to have at least one parent to look up to.

My mother told me my dad killed himself. "Blew himself to smithereens," were her exact words. But it was an accident; I know it. I overheard her telling my auntie on the phone that he was trying to make homemade shatter, the equivalent of turning marijuana into glass through an extraction process, in the bathroom of his mistress's small housing unit. He was using a propane torch, and it exploded in his face. The newspaper said the entire structure of the house was ruined — the roof blown ten feet high into the air, the doors blasted off the hinges.

My mom drank the hard stuff. She sometimes drank for days. Random people came and went; some never left and just passed out where they sat in the living room. All I wanted was for everyone to leave, so one night I snuck into the kitchen and poured out what was left of the bottles and cans covering the kitchen counter. She'd still swig the leftovers even if there was a cigarette butt inside. She caught me in the act as the last of her precious booze drained into the sink.

"Nyla!" she screamed, and threw me into my room, where she tried smothering me with my own pillow. She was a hefty woman, so when she sat on my arms I couldn't fight back. One of her friends happened to walk past my bedroom on her way to the bathroom and

saw my feet kicking behind the half-open, smoke-stained plastic door. She pulled my mom off me and out of my room while my mom cried and screamed, pointing her finger at me.

“I wish you were never born!” she hollered over and over in a pitiful rage until she was out of breath.

She had tried so hard to end my life that night. The life she created.

When I discovered the crawl space, it became my escape. I would enter a different world down there underneath the four-storied apartment building held up by large cement cylinders. I had to duck my head and crouch under the pipes crossing in all directions, like a highway. I crawled over sand and rock, feeling my way in the dark with only the small glow of my storage bedroom lighting up the shadows.

I never went far past the entrance of my crawl space. I was too afraid to venture into complete darkness but learned that each unit on the ground floor had its own entrance into the crawl space. What might happen if I went into the wrong apartment? Maybe I would find a new mother. One that would hug me and never let me go.

Despite my desire to get away from my mother, I would always return home through the hole in the floor and shut the cover before she found out I'd been down there. My secret could not be exposed. It was the only escape I had.

It was the one thing I could not hand over to her. It was all I had that made me feel like I had some control of my own life.



There was another girl my age in the apartment building. I often saw her playing outside at the bottom of the hill, building a makeshift fort by herself. She worked on her fort every day after school with a hammer and rusty old nails, but she never got very far. When winter came, as it inevitably did, she abandoned her fort and went sledding.

The apartment building sat on the side of a hill. Vehicles had to drive up the big, steep, winding hill to get to the top, which made for the best snow hill. For the longest time I didn't know how much

fun I could be having because I didn't go outside. It's not that I wasn't allowed; my mom probably wanted nothing more than for me to be out of her sight when she was home. It was more that I was afraid of going outside — of going out into the open. It's a fear I have struggled with on and off since I can remember. There's a name for it, I have since learned — agoraphobia. There's a name for everything nowadays. Agoraphobia left me conflicted, trapped between not wanting to leave my house but so desperately wanting to leave it at the same time.

Our apartment unit was situated in the middle of the hill, and I watched the girl through the ground-level living room window as she slid down on a piece of cardboard. I admired that she knew how to make her own fun.

Then one day, I heard her crying. I didn't see it happen, but when I saw her squirming and rocking back and forth on the ground, unable to get up, it was clear she'd slipped and fell on a patch of ice and hurt herself.

I had to help her somehow.

I tried to open the window, but it was frozen shut. The corners were covered in thick ice and pooled water from built-up condensation that spilled over the edge of the windowsill and down the paint-chipped white walls. When I looked out the window again it quickly fogged up from my breath. As much as I dreaded the thought of it, I had to help her, I had to go outside.

I tried to remember the last time I left the apartment as I searched for my boots in the back of the closet. I know I spent a few days in kindergarten, but then my mom stopped taking me when they started asking questions about why I was always late. When we first moved to Coppertown, she enrolled me in school only because she had to. At first, the school's automated machine called nearly every morning to remind her I was absent. But then the calls just stopped after a while. I guess they gave up.

I left my apartment with my boots on the wrong feet and no socks on. My light sweater wasn't enough to keep me warm, but I

didn't plan on being outside for long. Thinking fast, I ripped a piece of cardboard from one of the unpacked boxes in the living room where my mother's belongings had been sitting for years collecting dust. As I left the building, I folded it and lodged it between the lobby door and the doorframe so that it wouldn't automatically lock.

"Are you okay?" I asked, already shivering as I met her on the hill.

"I can't get up." She squirmed. By then she had managed to flip herself over and was trying to crawl up the impossibly slippery hill on her elbows without touching the cold hard ground with her bare hands because her mitts had slid out of reach, halfway down the slope.

"Here," I said, picking up her mitts. I helped her put them back on while I rubbed my own hands together and breathed into them to keep my circulation going. "Grab my hand."

I helped her get to her feet. She limped and sobbed in pain as we hurried back up the hill to the lobby. But when we got to the steel door, the cardboard had fallen out. Someone had come and gone.

"We're locked out," I cried as the cold slapped me in the face. I suddenly felt the urge to pee.

"I have a key," she said, fumbling in her pocket.

Once inside, I asked, "Are you gonna be okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks," she said, embarrassed. "I'm Em. Well, my real name's Emerald. My dad says I'm his jewel." She rolled her eyes.

"Okay, well, bye." I didn't know to introduce myself and turned and ran down the hallway back to my apartment before I peed my pants.



I was secretly glad Em tripped and fell that day or else we might never have become friends. I wanted to hang out with her much more than I wanted to stay indoors, and I faced my fears every time she waved at me through the window to come outside. After a while, it got easier and easier, to the point where I nearly forgot I was afraid of being outside at all — as long as I was with Em. We never did go very far from the apartment. We would sit on the rocks under her window

facing the sunset and splash our feet in the small pools of water after a good rain. We'd get bored and rip large weeds from their roots and throw them down the hill. In the sparse veil of the few trees that were left after bulldozing the land for development, we would find and step on hollowed out mushrooms that would shoot out a green powder.

"What's your name anyway?" she finally asked, after we had hung out a handful of times.

"Nyla. It's short for ... something." I felt slightly embarrassed that I couldn't pronounce my full name. Since as long I could remember, my mom just called me Nyla. She told me my grandfather wanted to name me a name that in his language meant fire, which she thought suited me just fine because according to her, when I was a baby I screamed and screamed until I was red in the face. In my culture they say we choose our parents before we are born, but I couldn't fathom having chosen my mother. She jumbled up the letters of my original name to come up with Nyla for short. Just like the explorers didn't care to know our names, I didn't think my name really mattered much to my mother either back then.

Em grew up with her dad, who said her mom went crazy after she got what people now refer to as postpartum depression. In those days there wasn't a name for it. Em said she wasn't sad about it because her dad made up for her mom not being around. He spoiled his precious jewel by buying her whatever she wanted. Every other week, Em got to order clothes out of the Sears catalogue. She always looked so trendy.

"Sometimes," Em told me one day, "my mom will stand under my bedroom window and throw rocks, calling for me. But my dad just closes the curtains and pretends he can't hear her." As she spoke, she threw tiny pebbles at the ground. I could hear her hurt, but she masked it with a smile and changed the subject quickly. "Let's get started on our fort."

It was finally summer, and we could stay out longer. I picked up the hammer and nails, but then from out of nowhere I saw my mom

coming up the hill. She was on her way home from a heavy night of drinking — doing, what she later joked with her sister on the phone, “the walk of shame.”

“Nyla, your tits are going to sag when you’re older if you play with hammers,” she yelled between puffs of a cigarette. I put the hammer down until she went inside, then started banging even louder, hoping it would add to the wicked headache I knew she was going to complain about later. Maybe if I finished the fort, I could one day live in it just to get away from her.

It made me sad to know that Em had a mom that actually wanted to be in her life but was kept out. Then there was mine, who didn’t want anything to do with me. If I had to choose between who was worse off, me or Em, I guess I’d say me because at least Em knew her mom loved her.

I only ever really talked to Em’s dad a handful of times. The only times I remember him being nice to me were on the occasions when I got hurt. Like when Em and I were playing on the rocks behind the apartment, pretending we were professional rock climbers. I tried to show her up by climbing a steep cliff, but when I got halfway up, I could no longer carry my own weight. I had nowhere to put my feet for support and my grip slipped. I fell to the ground right next to a sharp, pointy rock. If I’d fallen a few inches over, I probably would have been paralyzed. Em must have thought it hurt worse than it did because, as I was about to get up, she started screaming for her dad, whose living room window was just above where we were climbing. So I decided to act hurt.

He quickly came down around the side of the apartment building to see what happened and assess the damage.

“Can you walk?” he asked.

“I don’t think so,” I lied. I wanted to be taken care of, I guess. To my surprise, he picked me up and carried me all the way back to the couch in their apartment. He got Em to bring me an ice pack to put on my back.

"I'll call your mother," he said, walking towards the kitchen.

"She's not home," I lied again, getting up quickly. "I'm okay now," I said and ran out the door.

It was nice to know what it might have felt like to have a dad, if only for a time.

I remember Em gave me a professional portrait of the two of them as a Christmas present one year. She was tucked under his shoulder and her head leaned on his chest as she stood on a chair to meet his height. His body language said he would always protect her, and it made me jealous. I crumpled it up and threw it in the garbage.



My mom smoked a lot. She always left lighters lying around the apartment. The first time I got hold of one, I spent the entire night flicking the small wheel off and on in the dark of my bedroom. I just lay there, staring at the blue and red flame until my thumb was numb and I couldn't hold the wheel down anymore.

Growing braver, one day I managed to steal a few of my mom's cigarettes from the back of the freezer where she kept them, thinking the cold would keep the tobacco fresh. I didn't want to try smoking alone so I tried to get Em to smoke with me. When we met up in the elevator, I handed her a long skinny white menthol.

"No, it's all right," she said.

"Come on."

"No, I don't want to." She put the back of her hand up in front of her mouth to shield herself from me.

I hit the emergency stop button and cornered her. For a moment I held the burning end of the lit cigarette so close to her eye I could have nearly burned her blind.

"Whatever," I breathed, as I blew a cloud of smoke in her face like a movie star.

Em pressed the button for her floor in a panic, and when the elevator doors opened, she ran out, trying to hold back tears. I didn't

care then, but later that evening I started to wonder why I did it. I was supposed to be her best friend. Best friends don't do that to each other, I knew that. Was I becoming like my mother?

No. I would never allow it.

That night, I burned myself to try and rid the guilt and regret of what I'd done. I let the steel end of the lighter heat up until it was red hot, then I pushed it hard against my cheek. The pain rang through every cell in my body, telling me to stop, but I fought off the voice and pressed down even harder until my skin brought the lighter back down to room temperature, leaving a blister in the shape of a horseshoe on my face. The scar eventually faded but it's still noticeable under certain light or in cold weather, like a case of bad frostbite.

To my surprise, Em forgave me a few days later. I thought she would never speak to me again, but she was the forgiving kind, which made me feel like I didn't deserve her. I knew Em secretly wondered if maybe my mother gave me the blister, but she never directly came out and asked me. Maybe my own mother wondered if she did it to me too, in one of her drunken rages.

We gave up on the fort as we got older. Eventually our daily meet-up spot moved to the steps of the empty stairwell on the far side of our apartment building. I listened intently to Em day after day as she went on about her mother while I tried to blow smoke rings. One day, as Em was talking about how her dad said her mom shook her when she was a baby, I'd had enough and interrupted her woes by jumping off the steps.

"This is for your mother," I said, and proceeded to start a small fire in the blue faded carpet at the bottom of the stairs.

"What are you doing?" Em ran over to the flames and stomped them out. "Are you crazy? What did you do that for?"

I just shrugged and laughed, "It's out. Relax."

After that, I made small fires everywhere I went. I even set off

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aerosol spray cans, the kind that make your house smell nice. We didn't have any at my house, but Em's dad always had one next to the toilet. I learned through trial and error that if you hold a lighter up to the nozzle while pressing down on it, the spray can would light up like a flamethrower. Em would have to open her bedroom window so the flames had somewhere to go. The first time I did it she freaked out, but after a while she got used to the crazy things I did when we were bored. She even tried it herself.

"See, I told you it's fun," I said, watching as she held the spray can as far away from her body as possible and turned her face away.

"If you can't beat 'em, join 'em!" she said with a shrug.

For Em, fire was something to be feared. For me, fire was a desire. I was completely drawn to it in the same way that people are drawn to an addiction. I would revel in the flames I created. Sometimes, I would run my hand over the heat quickly; other times, slowly, to see how it felt to feel such warmth. It was comforting.

It was a pain I could control.

Lying in my bed at night, I eventually figured out how to empty out the gritty charcoal inside the lighter by winding the grinder up backwards until there was enough residue built up to pour the contents out. I tipped the powder out onto the glass surface of the cheap patio table that was my nightstand, tapping the lighter to let the crackling powder pile up. I gathered the salt-and-pepper dust on my thumb and middle finger and snapped it over the lighter's flame, causing sparks that looked like tiny fireworks. It was the same stuff they used for those sparkly candles on Em's birthday cake that set the smoke alarm off in her apartment and made everything smell like rotten eggs.



When my mother wasn't home, Em would sometimes come over and bring her assortment of catalogue clothes in a fancy rolling suitcase. We would dress up and pose like models while listening to music with her stereo blaring the latest mixtape she made.

“Wanna see something cool?” I asked her as we lay around in my bedroom atop a pile of colourful clothes that covered the floor — clothes that neither of us would ever be brave enough to wear out in public. I wore a dark green, velvet body suit and she had on a sequined ball gown that was too big on her. She had ordered it with plans to one day graduate in.

“Sure,” she said, naively opening herself up to my dark world without knowing it.

I trusted Em. I trusted her so much that I wanted to show her my secret. I wanted to share with her the one place I swore I would never let anyone else know about. When I opened the latch to the crawl space under my bed, Em was cautious. “What’s down there?”

“Nothing, it’s just cool down there,” I said innocently. “It’s not much of a jump. It looks hard but it’s pretty easy if you don’t overthink it.”

The floor wasn’t far from the ground, but the first time I lowered myself through it, I nearly bounced my face hard off the edge. It was a very small, square hole, so you had to jump at just the right angle and time your jump so that you didn’t hit your chin on the opening or knock your shins on one of the long silver pipes inside.

Em got up the nerve to join me once I lowered myself in. She made it down in one piece with a little guidance and stared at me with a scared look in her eyes.

“How are we going to get back up?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll boost you up.”

“Can you leave the door open for light?” she asked when I was about to slide the wooden frame over the hole. I had gotten used to being in complete darkness.

“Sure, but we’re safe down here. No one can hurt us.”

She looked at me, puzzled. “Who would hurt us?”

“Never mind,” I said.

“Do you spend a lot of time down here?” she asked, taking a sudden interest in my life, wanting to talk about me instead of her for once.

“No,” I lied.

After a pause, she finally came out and said, “She’s mean to you, isn’t she? Your mom?”

“No,” I lied again. I don’t know why I felt the need to lie to Em. Maybe it was to avoid having to admit it to myself, to protect myself from the truth.

“Why’d you bring me down here? I mean it’s cool and all, I guess, but it’s weird,” she said. She tried to stand up but there wasn’t enough room. “What are all these pipes for?” she asked, following one of them with her hand.

“I think they’re just full of gas or maybe water. Let’s find out.” Without thinking of the consequences, I fished for the yellow lighter in my pocket. I looked over at Em who had inched her way back to the opening. She was standing up straight with her head peeking out, trying to figure out how to get out.

“I think I’m feeling claustered,” she said.

The small flame from my lighter lit up the dark and Em turned and ducked to see where the light was coming from.

“What are you doing?” she asked when she saw me holding the flame up to the pipe.

I didn’t answer. I was too preoccupied with wondering if that was all it would take to blow up the building, just one small flame.

“Nyla!” Em shouted to get my attention.

I took my thumb off the trigger.

Though it was just a fleeting thought, this marked the beginning of my distorted curiosities.

I quickly stuffed the warm lighter back into my pocket. “It’s harmless. It’s mostly just water running through these things anyway,” I said, knocking on a hollow-sounding pipe.

Em stared at me in disbelief, suddenly sounding more like an adult than a kid, “Were you trying to kill us?”

“No,” I said defensively. I tried to laugh it off.

“Just get me out of here,” she demanded.

I didn't try to talk her out of it. I respected her wishes, even though I could have stayed down there longer. Together we could hide away. The crawl space was a place where life didn't seem to exist at all. Not even a spider. Just a long stretch of sand and rock from one corner of the building to the other.

I hoisted Em back up through the floorboards, letting her step into the palms of my hands as I fought to keep my fingers interlocked. Once she was out, I lifted myself up without help. By then, I had gone down there so much on my own that I could get up and out easily.

Em didn't speak to me for a while after that, and I stopped going down into the crawl space. Not because I wanted to stop, but because my mother caught me down there — I'm assuming Em told her dad about it, who must have told my mom.

I was deep down inside, exploring the hilly part of the crawl space, when I heard my mother's angry stomp coming closer and closer until the floorboard cover slid open. She got down on her hands and knees and stuck her head through the square hole. Looking like she was about to do a push-up, holding onto both edges of the hole, she yelled my name angrily.

“Nyla!”

I didn't answer. I crawled backwards as far back as I could go, trying to slide between the pipes until the space between them became too narrow.

I knew she wouldn't come in after me. At least I was safe in that sense. But she shut me in and waited, knowing I would eventually have to come out. Out of both stubbornness and fear, I sat there for hours until I couldn't take it anymore. I was hungry, thirsty and out of lighter fluid.

I didn't leave the apartment at all that summer. The fear of leaving my bedroom had found me again.