



FIRE IN FROST

A CRYSTAL FROST NOVEL
ALICIA RADES

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To Linda Joy Singleton, whose writing I have looked
up to for years.

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My knees buckled and my hands trembled as I reached for the door to the school. An invisible weight came crushing down on my lungs as I gasped for air.

“What’s wrong?” Emma asked with urgency. “Crystal, you look sick. Are you okay?”

I paused, unable to move or speak because I was afraid I would collapse if I did. The truth was, I didn’t know *what* was wrong with me.

“Crystal,” Emma prodded, resting a hand on my shoulder.

I blinked a few times and finally caught my breath. My voice was hoarse and barely there. “Yeah, I think I’ll be alright. I just have a weird feeling.”

Once I found my legs, we entered the building. The commons took on a different role today. Instead of everyone seated at tables waiting for the bell to ring, most were crowded toward the far end of the room. It was quieter than normal, too, as if a tragedy had just taken place.

“What’s everyone doing?” I asked in a near whisper as I stood on my toes to get a better look.

“I don’t know,” Emma started, but she cut off. “Oh yeah. Remember the fundraiser they’re doing today for Olivia Owen? They must have started already.”

Now that Emma pointed it out, I remembered yesterday’s announcements reminding students about a fundraiser in memory of Olivia. I knew Olivia’s story. In a small town of 3,500, *everyone* knew about Olivia’s tragic death that happened last year.

I approached the table where the crowd stood and moved to the side so I could see. When I got a clear view, I saw two girls sitting behind the table, Kelli Taylor and Justine Hanson, the co-queen bees of the school. Athletic, beautiful, straight A students, these girls were pretty much the poster children for perfection. In front of them sat boxes of candy bars they were selling for the fundraiser.

Informational flyers and pictures of Olivia scattered the table. There was even a large framed photo of her junior volleyball picture taken just weeks before her death. She stood with a confident stance in her number 17 volleyball jersey with the ball resting on her

hip. Her blonde hair was straightened, and her dark brown irises made her eyes appear larger than they should. She looked more like an angel than a student. *It's sad, I thought, that she didn't live long enough to finish the season – or even to graduate for that matter.*

I grabbed one of the flyers from the stack and began reading.

Fundraising for Burn Victims: In Memory of Olivia Owen

By Justine Hanson

Olivia Owen was once a loving daughter, student, and athlete. She was a straight-A student who set an example for her fellow classmates by becoming an active member of the student council and the community service club. Her athletic abilities surpassed those of her fellow junior-year volleyball players despite her asthma, and if she would have made it to the end of the season, she would have undoubtedly claimed the title of MVP. Olivia was a spectacular human being, volunteering when she could, helping the community with things like the Peyton Springs Halloween Festival and the Fourth of July Parade.

But more than anything, Olivia was my best friend. I knew her and loved her like a sister, and it pains my heart each day to know that her life was cut short at only age 17. When Olivia forgot to blow out a candle before she fell asleep, her curtains caught fire and she suffered an asthma attack before she could escape the smoke or find her inhaler. I can't

imagine the physical pain she must have endured that night.

Because of this tragic tale, Olivia's family and friends decided to honor her life by helping raise money for other burn victims and their families who have survived house fires. Today, on the anniversary of Olivia's death, we ask you to contribute by purchasing one of our fundraising products (candy bars, baked goods, and other donated items) or by simply dropping \$1 into one of our donation jars located throughout the school.

Olivia's mother and her friends thank you for any and all contributions, and we hope to continue raising money for families like Olivia's. Thank you, and God bless!

"What's it say?"

I jumped. I didn't realize Emma had followed me to the table.

"It's just a flyer explaining the fundraiser," I told her.

Olivia's story was sad. I felt like I couldn't just leave the flyer there, one that told her story to the world. I wanted to contribute in some way, but I didn't have any money on me, so I simply folded the paper up and slid it in my pocket, hoping that would show I cared.

The thought of death crushed my heart, so I kept my eyes down, avoiding gazes so I wouldn't tear up. I didn't know Olivia that well, but since we were both on the volleyball team—although she was Varsity when I was on the freshman team—I'd spoken to her a few times.

I blinked back tears as I thought of Olivia's tragedy. The whole idea of death brought a lump to my throat and resurfaced memories that I'd thought I'd gotten over. Emma rubbed my back to comfort me because she knew the subject of death was a touchy one.

As I stared at the floor, afraid to look up for fear that tears might start falling, an invisible force—something unknown willing me to look—pulled my chin up. My gaze fell upon the empty hallway to the right of the commons area where students hadn't yet been released to roam for the day.

In the middle of the hallway stood a tall, beautiful girl with blonde hair and dark brown eyes. She looked at me across the distance, her eyes full of emotion. I couldn't pinpoint exactly what she was trying to say with her expression, except that I knew it was urgent.

As soon as I spotted her, the bell rang, announcing that students could now go to their lockers and prepare for class. The crowd dispersed from the commons into the hallway and blocked my view of the girl. The students hurried down the hall as if they didn't see her. I kept my eye on where she was standing, but I didn't see her again.

"Crystal." Emma's voice seemed far off, a distant hum in my confusion.

The faintness I felt just moments ago returned. My heart pounded in my ears, and for a second, my knees felt unstable. I gripped the edge of the fundraising table for support.

Emma snapped her fingers in front of my face. “Crystal,” she said again as her voice came back into focus.

I was suddenly whipped back into reality, dazed. “Wh—what?”

“Are you okay?” Emma asked with a tone of serious concern. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I let the statement sink in for a moment. “Yeah,” I said. But I wasn’t answering her initial question. I was agreeing with her latter statement.

But I didn’t see a ghost. I couldn’t have. An odd sensation stirred as a chill spread from my spine to the end of my fingertips. This was the same type of chill I used to get when I had my imaginary friend Eva over for tea before I started kindergarten. *I’m imagining things*, I told myself, mostly as reassurance.

But I had seen her clear as day. Olivia Owen had stood in the hallway and begged for my help with nothing but an expression. Yet how could that be when she died a year ago?

Emma took my arm and led me to our lockers as I silently assured myself I wasn’t crazy.