

## **Embers of Deceit**

By Nicholas E., grade 9

The first day of senior year at Millfield High had arrived, and Amelia Hayes felt a mix of excitement and unease. The school year was supposed to be full of opportunities—senior year meant one step closer to freedom, to the future. But for some reason, something felt off.

Maybe it was the wind, how it seemed to whisper through the trees outside, or maybe it was the strange heaviness in the air, like a storm was coming. Amelia couldn't put her finger on it, but she had a feeling that something was about to happen. Something that would change everything.

Amelia stood by her locker, trying to organize her books, but her mind kept wandering. The hallway was full of chatter. People were reuniting after the summer, laughing, exchanging stories about vacations and adventures. But to Amelia, the noise felt distant, muffled—as if she was the only one who noticed the odd sense of tension in the air.

“Amelia! Over here!” Rachel's voice broke through her thoughts.

Amelia turned to see her best friend, Rachel Harris, waving from down the hall. Rachel was a whirlwind of energy, always moving, always smiling, and usually the center of attention. Where Amelia was quiet, Rachel was loud; where Amelia was careful and observant, Rachel was outgoing and bold.

Rachel's long brown hair was pulled into a messy ponytail, and she wore a bright red sweater that matched her carefree attitude. She was already surrounded by a few friends, but when she spotted Amelia, she quickly excused herself from the group.

“You are not going to believe what happened this summer,” Rachel said as she approached, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “You remember Tyler, right? Well, he totally—”

“I'm glad to see you too,” Amelia interrupted with a small laugh, cutting off Rachel's rambling.

Rachel raised an eyebrow but smiled, giving Amelia a playful shove. “Always so serious, Ames. Anyway, get this—Tyler and I... we, uh, had a little thing this summer.” She waggled her eyebrows, clearly waiting for a reaction.

Amelia’s lips twitched into a smile, though she wasn’t really focused on Rachel’s story. Her gaze wandered again, this time over the sea of students, and she felt that strange feeling in her chest—the one that told her she wasn’t quite alone, even though she was surrounded by people.

“Amelia?” Rachel’s voice sounded distant for a moment, pulling her back to reality. “Are you even listening?”

Amelia blinked and met Rachel’s gaze. “Sorry. I just... I don’t know. I’ve been feeling kind of weird today.”

Rachel’s expression softened, her playful demeanor fading for just a second. “Weird how? You okay?”

Before Amelia could answer, the school bell rang, signaling the start of the day. Rachel waved it off with a grin. “Well, if something’s bothering you, we’ll talk later. Come on, let’s get to homeroom before we get stuck with a tardy slip.”

Amelia nodded, but as she walked beside Rachel down the hallway, she couldn’t shake the feeling that something—someone—was watching her. The hallway seemed darker, even though the sun outside was shining bright. Every time she looked over her shoulder, she saw nothing but students chatting and laughing, but the sense of being watched wouldn’t go away.

When they reached their homeroom, Amelia’s unease deepened. She pushed the door open and stepped inside, scanning the room for a seat. Her eyes automatically went to the back of the room, where a few familiar faces were sitting, but then her attention was drawn to one particular figure.

In the far corner of the room, there was a new student—a tall boy, his back to the door. He had dark hair, the kind that looked like it could use a good comb, and he wore an old, slightly worn

leather jacket. The mysterious aura around him was almost palpable. Even from across the room, Amelia could feel his presence, like a magnetic force pulling her in.

“Isn’t that...?” Rachel whispered beside her.

Amelia didn’t answer at first. She wasn’t sure how to explain it, but she felt like she had seen him before. Something about him seemed so familiar, but she couldn’t place it.

The boy turned slightly in his seat, and Amelia’s heart skipped a beat. His eyes met hers for just a moment, a brief flash of recognition in his gaze. Then, almost as if he realized he was being watched, he quickly looked away, focusing on the front of the classroom.

“Who is that?” Rachel asked, her curiosity piqued.

“I don’t know,” Amelia replied, though she felt a deep sense of uncertainty. “But I think I’ve seen him around before.”

Rachel’s lips curled into a grin. “Ooh, a mystery. I like it.”

But Amelia wasn’t sure she liked it. In fact, her instincts were telling her that there was more to this new student than met the eye.

As the bell rang for class to begin, Amelia tried to focus on the lesson, but her mind kept drifting back to the boy in the corner. She couldn’t shake the feeling that their paths were somehow intertwined—and not in a way that made her feel comfortable. It was as if something dangerous was looming just beyond her reach.

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The rest of the day dragged on, each class more uneventful than the last. But Amelia couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong. Her mind kept returning to the new student, the

boy in the leather jacket, who she had only seen for a few seconds but had left a lasting impression on her. She couldn't explain it. There was something about the way he looked at her, as if he knew her—or at least, knew something about her.

By the time the final bell rang, Amelia was exhausted. She wasn't used to feeling so unsettled. As she made her way to her locker, Rachel bounced up beside her, chatting away about the lunch menu and her plans for the weekend. But Amelia's mind was elsewhere.

"Hey, you still with me?" Rachel asked, raising an eyebrow when she noticed the distant look in Amelia's eyes.

"Yeah," Amelia muttered, her voice distant. "Just... thinking."

Rachel laughed lightly. "You're always thinking. Come on, let's go to the cafeteria. I'm starving."

Amelia nodded but didn't answer. She needed to get this feeling out of her system. The hallway was crowded, but as they passed through the throngs of students, Amelia's gaze once again flickered to the boy from homeroom. He was standing near the lockers, talking to a group of upperclassmen. His back was turned, but his presence still seemed to draw her in. It was like he was the center of a silent vortex, pulling her attention without even trying.

"Who is that guy?" Rachel whispered, following Amelia's gaze. "He's definitely not a freshman."

Amelia hesitated. "I don't know. But I feel like I've seen him before."

Rachel laughed again, brushing it off. "You probably just saw him around town or something. He doesn't look like someone who'd keep a low profile."

But Amelia couldn't shake the feeling. Every instinct screamed that there was something wrong, something hidden beneath the surface of this mysterious new student.

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Later that afternoon, as Amelia sat in her room, going over homework, she heard a soft knock at the door.

“Come in,” she called without looking up, thinking it was her mom or maybe Rachel coming by to hang out.

The door creaked open, and to her surprise, it wasn’t Rachel standing in the doorway. It was the new student—the boy from school.

“Amelia Hayes?” he asked, his voice low and a little raspy, as if he had been waiting a while to speak.

Amelia froze, her heart thudding in her chest. How did he know her name?

“I... I’m sorry, do I know you?” she asked, trying to sound calm, though she felt anything but.

He stepped inside, his eyes scanning the room for a moment before meeting hers again. There was a brief pause, and then he nodded, a strange glint in his eyes. “We’ve met before.”

Amelia’s mind raced. She didn’t recognize him, and he didn’t seem like anyone she knew. “I don’t think so,” she said, feeling a chill run down her spine.

The boy’s lips curled into a faint, knowing smile. “I guess that’s not surprising. You don’t remember much of that day, do you?”

The words hung in the air, and Amelia’s blood ran cold. What day? What was he talking about?

“What do you mean?” she asked, trying to keep her voice steady, though she was growing increasingly uncomfortable with his presence.

He stepped closer, lowering his voice. “You were at the lake that night. The night the fire started.”

Amelia’s stomach dropped. That night—the night of the fire. It was a memory she had buried deep in her mind, one that she had tried to forget. It had been two years ago, a night that

started out like any other, with a group of friends gathering near the lake. But everything had gone horribly wrong. The fire. The panic. The escape.

She had been there, of course—she could never forget—but she hadn't spoken about it to anyone. It was too painful, too much of a blur. And yet, here he was, talking about it like it was just another casual conversation.

“How do you know about that?” she whispered, suddenly feeling as if the room were closing in on her.

The boy seemed to hesitate before answering. “I was there. You don't remember me, but I remember you.” His eyes darkened as he took another step closer. “You were the only one who made it out.”

Amelia's mind whirled. She had been told that everyone who had been there that night had escaped, but hearing this boy's words felt like a slap in the face. He knew more than he should. He knew about the fire. About the night that changed everything.

But what did he want? Why was he here?

“Why are you telling me this?” Amelia demanded, her voice shaking slightly, the unease turning to something more like fear.

The boy's expression softened, and for a moment, he looked almost... apologetic. “I didn't want to bring it up. But you need to know. The fire wasn't an accident. Someone started it, and you were the target.”

Amelia felt the blood drain from her face. “What are you talking about?” she asked, barely able to form the words.

The boy stepped back, his eyes locked onto hers. “You've been running from the truth. But it's been following you. And it's going to catch up with you sooner or later.”

With that, he turned and walked out of the room, leaving Amelia frozen, her heart pounding in her chest. The air around her felt colder, heavier, like something was pressing down on her chest.

Her thoughts raced, the boy's words echoing in her mind. The fire wasn't an accident. Someone had targeted her. But why? And who?

As the door clicked shut behind him, Amelia realized with growing horror that this wasn't just some strange coincidence. This was the beginning of something much darker than she had ever imagined.

Amelia stood in the middle of her room, her mind spinning. The boy's words—*The fire wasn't an accident. Someone started it, and you were the target*—echoed in her head like a cruel refrain. She knew the fire had been a tragedy, a freak accident, or so everyone had believed. But hearing those words made the room feel smaller, suffocating.

She had no idea what to believe anymore.

Her phone buzzed on the desk, and Amelia jumped. It was a text from Rachel.

*Hey, where'd you go after school? Was hoping we could grab coffee before we head home.*

Amelia felt a wave of relief. Rachel was always a grounding force in her life, someone who could pull her back from spiraling into her own thoughts. She quickly typed back:

*Sorry, I got caught up in something. I'll meet you at the café in 10 minutes?*

Rachel's reply came almost immediately:

*Perfect! See you soon.*

But as Amelia looked at the text, she couldn't shake the feeling that even with Rachel, she couldn't truly escape what was happening. Her thoughts kept returning to the boy—the mysterious student who knew far too much about the fire. What was his connection to it? And why had he come to her now?

After a few minutes of pacing her room, Amelia knew she couldn't let it go. She had to find answers.

Grabbing her jacket, she stepped out of her room and made her way down the stairs. Her mom was in the kitchen, humming while preparing dinner, her back to Amelia.

"Mom," Amelia started, hesitating, "do you remember anything about the fire? The one at the lake two years ago?"

Her mom paused, the knife she had been using to chop vegetables falling to the cutting board with a soft thud. She turned around, her face suddenly pale.

"What brought that up?" her mom asked, her voice tight.

"I don't know... I just..." Amelia trailed off, unsure of how to voice the strange unease swirling inside her. "I've been thinking about it, and I just... I don't understand everything that happened that night."

Her mom's face softened, but there was a certain guarded look in her eyes. "Honey, it was a terrible accident. There's nothing more to it."

Amelia took a deep breath, the frustration bubbling inside her. "But why is it still bothering me? I can't stop thinking about it, Mom. What if it wasn't an accident? What if I was targeted?"

Her mom went silent for a moment, the air between them growing thick. Amelia could see the hesitation in her eyes. Finally, her mom shook her head.

"You need to let it go, Amelia. There's nothing more to be done. It was a freak accident, and everyone moved on from it. So should you."

Amelia's heart sank. "But—"

"No more talk about it," her mom said sharply, a tone that silenced Amelia instantly. "You've got your senior year ahead of you. Don't waste it on old ghosts."



There was a finality in her voice that made Amelia feel small. She nodded, but inside, she felt a gnawing sense of something being hidden from her. Something her mom wasn't telling her.

Amelia didn't say anything else. She grabbed her jacket and left, her mind reeling. She wasn't going to let it go. She couldn't. Too many questions lingered, and the only way to get answers was to dig deeper.

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The small café on Main Street was only a short walk away, and soon, Amelia found herself sitting across from Rachel, trying her best to push the dark thoughts aside. Rachel was talking animatedly about a party she had gone to the weekend before, but Amelia's mind was elsewhere.

"You okay?" Rachel finally asked, her voice softer now as she noticed Amelia's distracted look.

"Yeah, just... tired," Amelia replied, offering a faint smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "It's been a weird day."

Rachel leaned back in her chair, her eyes narrowed with concern. "What's going on, really? I can tell something's bothering you."

Amelia hesitated. She wanted to tell Rachel about the boy, about the fire, about everything that had happened earlier, but part of her wasn't sure if she could trust anyone with the information. The feeling of being watched, the fear that had crept up her spine—it all felt too much to share.

"I just... I don't know if I'm ready to talk about it yet," Amelia said, her voice distant.

Rachel didn't push, though she gave her a knowing look. "Well, if you ever do want to talk, I'm here."

"Thanks," Amelia replied, grateful for Rachel's patience.

As they finished their coffee and made their way out of the café, Amelia's phone buzzed again. She pulled it out, expecting another message from her mom, but this time it was a number she didn't recognize.

*Amelia, I know you're looking for answers. Meet me at the old bridge by the lake at midnight. I'll tell you everything. —The Boy*

Amelia's blood ran cold.

Her heart pounded in her chest. She glanced at Rachel, who had stopped walking beside her.

"Everything okay?" Rachel asked, her eyebrows raised as she noticed the sudden shift in Amelia's demeanor.

"Yeah," Amelia whispered, though she was anything but okay. "I need to go to the lake tonight."

Rachel frowned. "What do you mean? It's late, Amelia. And why the lake? That place still freaks me out after what happened."

"I know," Amelia replied, her voice shaky. "But I have to. I have to find out what really happened that night."

Before Rachel could say anything else, Amelia turned and began walking, her steps quickening as a sense of urgency filled her. She knew it was a risk, going alone to meet the boy. But the message was clear: there were answers waiting for her, answers that she couldn't ignore.

As the evening sky darkened and the stars began to prick through the sky, Amelia made her way toward the lake, her heart beating faster with each step. The old bridge loomed in the distance, barely visible in the twilight. A sense of foreboding settled around her like a thick fog.

The streets were eerily quiet for a Friday night, with only a few cars passing by. Amelia's footsteps echoed loudly against the pavement as she walked, her thoughts racing. What was she walking into? Who was the boy really, and what did he know about the fire? And why had he singled her out?

She couldn't stop the nagging feeling that this meeting was more dangerous than she'd realized.

As she reached the bridge, she stopped, scanning the area. The lake was still, its surface reflecting the moonlight, like a giant mirror. The trees around it rustled softly in the breeze, but otherwise, everything was still. The air felt colder here, and Amelia pulled her jacket tighter around her.

The boy wasn't there yet.

Her phone buzzed again, and Amelia quickly pulled it out.

*You're almost there. I'm already waiting. Don't be afraid. Everything will make sense soon. –The Boy*

Amelia took a deep breath and crossed the bridge, her eyes darting from shadow to shadow. The darkness here felt thicker, as if it swallowed sound and light. She was alone, save for the distant hum of crickets and the occasional rustle of the trees. The further she walked, the more distant everything else seemed, until she was entirely cut off from the world.

Then, from the corner of her eye, she saw movement.

The boy.

He stood a few feet away, his silhouette partially obscured by the shadows of the trees. His posture was casual, but there was an intensity about him that made Amelia's stomach twist.

"You came," he said, his voice as soft and steady as before. "I wasn't sure you would."

Amelia swallowed her nerves, trying to steady her shaking hands. "I don't even know who you are," she replied, her voice echoing slightly in the stillness. "Why are you here? Why did you message me?"

The boy stepped closer, his footsteps muffled by the dirt path beneath them. The moonlight caught his features for the first time, and Amelia's breath caught in her throat. He wasn't just

anyone. He looked... familiar. His face was striking, though there was something cold about it, almost otherworldly. His eyes, dark as the night itself, were focused on her with an intensity that sent chills down her spine.

“I’m someone you should have remembered,” he said, his voice low and measured. “But you don’t.”

Amelia blinked, trying to make sense of his words. “I don’t understand. Why do you keep saying that? What happened that night?”

The boy let out a slow sigh. “That night was no accident. The fire—it was meant for you, Amelia. And it’s not over.”

Amelia’s mind reeled. She couldn’t breathe. “What are you talking about? The fire... it—it was just a freak accident. That’s what they told us. Everyone said it was an accident.”

The boy’s eyes darkened. “They lied to you. The fire was set deliberately. Someone started it, and they were targeting you.”

“No,” Amelia whispered, shaking her head. “That can’t be true.”

“It is.” His voice was firm, almost too firm, like he was trying to make her believe him. “And it’s why you’ve been feeling this way. Ever since you escaped that night, they’ve been watching you. Waiting for the right time.”

Amelia’s chest tightened. Her thoughts were all over the place, but one thing was clear now: the fire wasn’t an accident. She’d been targeted. But by who? And why?

“You were the only one who made it out, Amelia,” he continued. “The others... they’re gone. And now, you’re the next piece in a much bigger puzzle. You have something they want.”

She took a step back, her pulse racing. “I don’t have anything. I don’t know anything.”

The boy's gaze softened, but his voice remained steady. "You don't remember, but you will. They erased it from your mind, but it's all coming back. You were a part of something you don't understand yet."

Amelia's head was spinning. She tried to process his words, but it felt like he was speaking in riddles.

"What do you mean? What did they do to me? What's coming back?"

Before the boy could answer, a sudden noise interrupted their conversation—footsteps, breaking the silence. Amelia's heart skipped a beat as she looked around, her eyes scanning the darkness. It was too late to run. Whoever was approaching had already heard them.

The boy's expression hardened. "You shouldn't be here. You don't know what you're walking into."

"I don't care," Amelia said, trying to hold her ground despite the fear creeping into her voice. "I want answers."

He hesitated for a moment, his eyes shifting nervously as the sound of footsteps grew louder.

"Then you'll get them," he said, turning his back to her. "But you won't like what you hear."

Suddenly, two figures emerged from the darkness, stepping onto the bridge with silent precision. Amelia's breath caught in her throat. The figures were masked, their faces obscured, and they moved with an unsettling calmness. Amelia instinctively took a step back, her body tensing.

"Get away from her," the boy warned, his voice turning cold, protective.

The masked figures didn't say anything, but their presence was enough to send a chill down Amelia's spine. The boy stepped forward, shielding Amelia, and for the first time, she saw a flicker of emotion in his eyes—fear.

"You're not taking her," the boy said, his voice now a low growl.

The masked figures didn't respond. Instead, they moved swiftly toward them, and in that moment, Amelia realized just how serious this was. She had stepped into something far more dangerous than she had ever imagined.

The boy turned to Amelia, his voice urgent. "Run. Now."

But before Amelia could move, one of the figures lunged toward her, grabbing her by the arm with inhuman strength.

Amelia's heart pounded in her chest as the masked figure's grip tightened on her arm. She could feel the coldness of their fingers through her jacket, like a vice that threatened to crush her spirit as much as her body. Her breath caught in her throat, and panic surged through her veins.

The boy who had been guiding her, who had spoken of secrets and danger, stood frozen for a brief moment, his eyes filled with a mix of anger and fear. Then, without warning, he pushed forward, throwing himself between Amelia and the attackers.

"Let her go!" he shouted, his voice raw with intensity.

The masked figures didn't speak, their movements smooth and methodical. They were a pair of shadows, like something not entirely human, yet unsettlingly powerful.

Amelia tried to pull away from the figure holding her, but their grip was like iron. She struggled, her mind racing. She needed to escape, but she had no idea where to go or how to fight back. The fear was overwhelming.

The boy lunged at the attackers, but one of them quickly stepped aside, blocking his path. The other held Amelia tighter, pulling her away from the confrontation, but the boy was relentless. He moved fast, using every ounce of strength to fight back.

"Amelia, run!" he screamed, his voice strained.

Instinct kicked in. Amelia had no time to think, no time to question anything. She twisted free from the figure's hold, just as the boy lunged forward again, this time landing a solid blow to

one of the masked figures. The attacker stumbled back, but before the boy could land another strike, the second figure grabbed him from behind, locking him in a grip so tight that he couldn't break free.

Amelia's pulse raced as she turned and bolted, her feet pounding the dirt path. She didn't dare look back. The boy had given her an opportunity to escape. Now, she had to use it.

The sounds of the struggle—grunts, footsteps, the muffled sound of someone being thrown to the ground—faded behind her, but the knot in her stomach remained. She wasn't safe yet.

Ahead, she saw the dim light of the bridge, the way out. But the attackers were fast, and they were closing in on her. Panic clawed at her chest, and she pushed herself harder, her legs aching from the sprint. Her mind screamed at her to run, to get away, to survive.

Just as she reached the edge of the bridge, a strong arm shot out from the darkness, grabbing her by the wrist and jerking her to a stop.

Amelia screamed, but the figure pulled her into the shadows before she could even react. Her breath hitched, her heart pounding in her throat as she twisted in the figure's grip.

"Shh. It's me," the boy said urgently, his voice low. He released her wrist and stepped back into the moonlight, revealing himself. "We don't have much time."

Her mind was a blur. "What's happening? Who are they? What do they want with me?"

The boy's face was tense, but his expression softened for a moment. "I'm sorry I dragged you into this. You were never supposed to be involved in all this. But they've been watching you since that night, Amelia. You've been running from the truth, but now you need to face it."

Amelia's head was spinning. "What truth?"

The boy's eyes hardened. "The fire. It wasn't an accident. You were part of something bigger—a plan, something they've been using to cover up their tracks. The fire was a test. And you survived."

“Test?” Amelia whispered, barely able to form the word. “What do you mean?”

The boy’s voice dropped to a near whisper. “You were one of many. They used the fire to cover their tracks, to get rid of the people who knew too much. But they didn’t expect you to survive. And now, you’re the key.”

Amelia’s stomach churned as realization hit her. “Key to what?”

“To the truth,” he said. “To the people who were behind everything—the people who started the fire. The people who want to control everything. You’re the last one who can stop them.”

Before Amelia could say another word, she heard it—the sound of footsteps again. They were getting closer, but this time, the figures weren’t alone. The boy’s eyes flashed with alarm.

“We need to move. Now.”

With no time to think, Amelia grabbed his hand, and together, they ran, ducking behind a large tree near the water’s edge. The masked figures were moving in fast, their footsteps quick and steady, and Amelia’s mind raced. She had no idea who they were or what they wanted with her. But she knew now that her life was tied to something much bigger than she could have imagined.

“Do you have any plan?” Amelia panted, trying to catch her breath.

The boy glanced over his shoulder, his eyes cold with determination. “Yes. But you need to trust me.”

Amelia hesitated. Her life had never been this dangerous, this uncertain. Yet, deep down, she knew she had no other choice.

The boy led her further into the trees, away from the bridge. “We can’t go back to the school. We have to get to the safe house. They’ve been tracking us for a while, and if we don’t act fast, they’ll catch us.”



“Safe house?” Amelia’s voice was shaky, but there was something about the boy’s presence that made her believe him. “What do you mean?”

“People who’ve been trying to stop them,” he replied. “People who know what’s going on. People like me.”

As they ran, Amelia’s thoughts were clouded with a thousand questions, none of which had any clear answers. But there was one thing she was certain of now: everything she thought she knew about her life, about the fire, about the people around her, was a lie.

And she wasn’t running anymore. She was fighting for the truth.

Weeks passed. The safe house, hidden far from the town and the memories of the lake, became Amelia’s new reality. She learned things she never thought possible. The boy—whose real name, she discovered, was Ethan—had been part of an underground group trying to uncover the corrupt forces behind the fire. The fire had been only the beginning, the first move in a larger, darker plan that Amelia had been unknowingly dragged into.

But now, she had a choice. She could stay hidden, safe in the shadows, or she could help fight back. She could find the people who’d done this to her—and stop them.

And Amelia had already made up her mind.

The fire wasn’t over. But neither was she.

The End