

The Fire Between Us



The Fire Between Us

Runaway Hearts • **Book One**



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This is a work of fiction. While this novel is set against real historical events, the characters and their specific experiences are fictional.

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Content Warning



The Fire Between Us contains depictions of slavery, racism, physical violence, infant loss (off page), grief, emotional abuse, coercion, and references to sexual assault. While the novel explores hope, love, and resilience, it does not shy away from the realities of the historical period in which it is set.

Please read with care.



Chapter One

October 4, 1850
Belhaven Estate

Every word echoed through the corridors.

Carolyn stood at the base of the stairs, her spine throbbing more with every passing moment. Her hands were folded so tightly in front of her that they had gone numb. Her father's voice struck the walls and floorboards, carrying up the stairs and lodging like bile in Carolyn's throat.

"You will marry him in a month, whether you want to or not," her father barked out. "You will not disgrace our family by having a child with Lord knows who and not marrying the one man willing to take you anyways."

The child—her child—who had led to her being restricted to the house for the last year. The boundary he had placed for her hadn't even reached the slave quarters.

"I'm grieving my son." Carolyn wrapped her arms around her torso, pain stabbing at her heart as she remembered how it felt to hold her son. "The son he forced onto me. I hardly recovered from birth when I lost Rowan."

"Enough!" Charles slammed his hand against the hall table. "You will not drag your feet on this anymore." Her father stood close to her, his finger in her face as he towered over her. "And you will not tell lies and besmirch the name of the only man willing to take a ruined woman."

"It's been a month, Carolyn I've given you more than enough time to grieve the death of a child you never should have made." Charles cleared his throat as he stepped back, fixing his collar. "Go make yourself presentable. Mr. Brigham will be here soon, and you will receive him properly."

His name sent a chill down her spine as a weight set heavily in her stomach.

Carolyn looked to the floor before whispering, "yes, father."

She took a deep breath as she made her way to her bedroom.

Carolyn pushed the door open, stopping when her eyes met a familiar face.

"There you are, Miss Carolyn." Her 'personal maid', Charlotte, rushed to her side. "I was told to get you ready."

Carolyn exhaled a shaky breath. "Then, I suppose we should do as we're told."

Charlotte motioned to the dress she laid out on the bed. "Been getting things ready for you." She smoothed the garment out carefully. "Readied a bath too, if you'd like that first."

Carolyn hadn't noticed the lavender soap wafting over her.

"Thank you, Charlotte." Carolyn offered her a tense smile, moving towards the tub that had been placed in the room. "Father really seems to want me to make a good impression on Mr. Brigham today."

Charlotte's movements faltered at the sound of his name.

She moved to carefully help Carolyn undress. "Don't sound like you want that, Miss."

"You know I don't." Carolyn pressed her lips into a thin line. "If I had my way, things would be very different."

"Don't let your father hear you talk like that." Charlotte's lips tugged down as she helped Carolyn settle into the tub.

Her muscles relaxed in the warm water as Charlotte began working the water through her hair.

"I understand why you call me that when there are other people around," Carolyn tilted her head back to look at Charlotte, "but why do you call me that when we're alone, Charlotte? I do still consider you my friend."

Charlotte sucked in a breath. "I think you know why, Miss." Her eyes darted to the door, holding their position just long enough for Carolyn to notice.

"He heard you, didn't he?" Carolyn lowered her voice, gently sitting her hand on Charlotte's arm to stop her. "Did he lay a hand on you?"

"Ain't nothin', Miss." Charlotte's eyes fell to the floor. "I should know my place by now."

"Did he threaten you?" Carolyn leaned to look at her friend.

Charlotte shook her head, swallowing softly. "Miss...you know this is dangerous talk."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to overstep, Charlotte." Carolyn sank into the water. "I just worry about you."

The pair finished Carolyn's bath in silence before Charlotte guided Carolyn out and helped to her dry off. Carolyn let out a soft hiss. The pain that shot through her abdomen when she shifted still felt as fresh as it had right after she had Rowan.

"Miss, are you okay?" Charlotte pulled the towel back.

"I'm alright. Seems I'm still a bit tender." Carolyn pressed her hand against her side gently.

Charlotte quickly helped Carolyn get dressed. Carolyn pressed her hand against the front of her corset as a familiar ache shot through her when Charlotte tightened it at her back.

A knock disturbed the pair, drawing both of their attention as it cracked open.

"Miss Carolyn, your father sent me to bring you down." An older woman entered the room with her head down. "Said to tell you you're late."

"Very well then." Carolyn nodded before following the woman down to the entryway.

Her heart sank lower with every step.

She stopped before her father and Mr. Brigham, the scent of tobacco and pomade filling her nose.

"Miss Carolyn, how wonderful it is for you to join us." Mr. Brigham took her hand, kissing it before she'd even had the chance to offer it. "My boys cannot wait to meet their new mother."

Her blood ran cold in her veins.

The widower—over twenty years her senior—had been trying to get her to marry him for the last few years.

Carolyn attempted to remember what his sons looked like but all she could recall was a mess of curls, a lopsided smile, and a cold stare that had haunted their shared childhood.

"Mr. Brigham." Carolyn pulled her hand away cautiously. "I hope your sons are doing well."

"It's Edward, my dear, I've told you that before." He maintained his smile but his eyes narrowed at her movement. "The boys are doing well."

Carolyn's lips nearly curved before she caught herself. "I'm glad the younger Mr. Brigham's are well."

Her father's gaze cut toward her. "Pay her no mind, Edward. Nineteen makes a girl think herself clever."

Mr. Brigham's jaw tightened. "Indeed."

The trio moved to the sitting room, where her father and Mr. Brigham discussed her dowry and wedding preparations.

Carolyn sat silently, staring out the window with her hands folded in her lap as she silently counted the men passing by as they worked. Mr. Brigham smirked as he watched her.

Charles waved his hand in front of her face, drawing her back to her reality.

"Carolyn?" His voice was softer now.

Carolyn hummed. She hadn't even noticed the men had stood up. "Forgive me. I seem to have lost myself for a moment."

"It happens to the best of us." Edward nodded to her once.

"It's time for dinner." Charles offered her a hand.

Carolyn took his hand, smoothing her skirt as she stood.

Charles took his seat at the head of the table, Carolyn moved to her usual seat, sitting to her left. The chair at the opposite end remained empty, as it had since her mother passed.

Mr. Brigham lowered himself into the chair across from her, the chair creaking beneath him in protest.

Enslaved women carried plate after plate to the table, filling the room with the scents of roasted meats, buttered vegetables, and warm bread until Carolyn's stomach turned with hunger and dread. She nodded to each woman as they served her. The only thanks she dared to give in front of Mr. Brigham, whose expression turned sour as he watched her.

Silverware clinked against porcelain as they ate, each scrape and tap too sharp in the tense silence.

"I need more water." Mr. Brigham said dryly. "How incapable are your slaves if they can't keep my cup full, Charles?"

"They know better than that." Her father rang a bell and the woman who had been filling their cups rushed over with a pitcher of water, refilling Mr. Brigham's glass.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Brigham, sir." She whispered, staring at the floor as she stepped back.

"Sorry for your incompetence?" He snapped.

"She refilled your glass," Carolyn glanced at his cup, refusing to raise her eyes to meet the gaze of either man. She couldn't help but roll her eyes. "There's no harm done."

“No harm done, huh?” Mr. Brigham scoffed as he rolled his sleeves. “If she can’t do her job, she needs to be taught a lesson. Isn’t that right, Charles?”

Her father nodded once, swallowing the food in his mouth as he motioned for Edward to continue.

Mr. Brigham stood and the sound of a sharp crack split the air, followed by a thud and the splash of water against the floor.

Carolyn caught herself flinching at the noise as she closed her eyes.

The woman shifted onto her knees, wiping the liquid up with her apron frantically.

Carolyn’s back tensed as the smell of tobacco and expensive cologne grew overwhelming.

Edward’s breath warmed her ear as he whispered, “and if you think she doesn’t need to learn, I will be teaching you many lessons throughout our marriage, *dear*.”

Carolyn’s nostrils flared as her head jerked to look at him.

“I think it’s time for me to go.” Edward straightened his back as he stood. “I will be back in a week to check on my bride to be.” He smoothed his jacket as he turned away from her.

“Of course, Carolyn will see you out.” Charles motioned towards his daughter.

Her fists balled beneath the table before she stood, following Mr. Brigham to the front door.

“Mind yourself when I return.” He leaned close, lowering his voice. “Don’t make me remind you why I’m the only man who will accept you.”

A shudder ran down her spine. “Until then, Mr. Brigham.”

Carolyn allowed him to take her hand, enduring the kiss he planted on the back of it with a grimace.

She held her breath until her breath until his carriage had passed the window. She allowed herself a moment before she smoothed her skirt, returning to the dining room.

October 7, 1850
Rosemount Hall

Splinters snagged Josiah's shirt as he leaned against the building. He took a deep breath, adjusting the rolls of his sleeves.

A scream—weaker than the last—tore through the yard, chilling his blood,

He closed his eyes, leaning his head back. "Come on, Ma." He whispered a quiet prayer.

She'd been at this all day, and he wasn't sure how much longer she could hold out.

His mother cried out again, earning him sympathetic looks from the nearby farm hands. Josiah ran a hand through his hair, but his nerves only twisted tighter.

His movement stilled as the screams stopped.

Josiah pushed off the wall when the wails of a newborn reached him.

Miriam, the closest thing they were allowed to a midwife, opened the door to the shack.

She looked around before her gaze found him. "Siah, you don't have long. The baby's healthy enough, but your ma's bad off...too far gone, I think."

She stepped to the side as Josiah rushed past her and into the room. Every breath tasted bitter, stale, wrong.

He looked his mother over as he knelt by her side.

"Mama?" He whispered, brushing his fingers through her hair gently.

Naomi offered her son a tense smile. "It's alright, baby."

"How are you feeling?"

She shook her head, letting out a shaky breath. "Don't worry about me, baby. Just take care of your brother."

His lips tugged down in the corners before he caught them.

"Can you do that for me, baby?" She reached a hand up to brush his cheek.

He nodded slowly. "Yeah, Mama."

"Good boy."

Miriam carefully placed a baby, bundled in a worn old quilt into his arms. The child was just about the smallest thing Josiah had ever seen. The baby looked up at him with wide eyes before scrunching his little face.

Their mother let out a strangled cough—falling still as Miriam rushed to her side.

Josiah felt his heart sink. “Is she...?” The words settled in his throat, refusing to come out.

“I’m sorry, Siah.” Miriam’s voice was barely above a whisper as she stood up.

Josiah bounced the baby on his arm as the baby built up to a full cry.

He stood up, pacing around the room as he fought the urge to match the child’s wails.

Miriam stepped beside him, smoothing the quilt. “Naomi named him Isaiah.”

Josiah nodded slowly, his eyes slowly drifting from his mother to the bundle in his arms.

He took deep breaths, but they only seemed to make the room feel smaller.

Isaiah squirmed, freeing an arm from the blanket and reaching up.

Josiah let out a soft noise before whispering to the baby. “Don’t worry. I’ll protect you, Isaiah.”

“You know what’s coming, don’t you?” Miriam frowned as she looked at him.

“Next?” He hadn’t thought his heart could sink further.

“I heard the overseer talking earlier.” She wrung her hands in front of her. “When I was tending to your ma...overseer said it plain as day as he walked past...said if she didn’t make it, baby was as good as coin.”

Josiah stilled, his breath coming out in short, frequent breaths.

He looked down at the baby, his jaw working slowly. Josiah glanced at the door, his hand tightening on the blanket around Isaiah.

“Siah, if you’re planning what I think you’re planning, you’re not.” Miriam’s voice grew firm as she glanced out the door. “If you do,” her voice dropped. “Rumor has it, if you make it to Belhaven,

the mistress won't turn you out. May not help, but they say she won't make things worse."

Josiah nodded slowly. "Thank you...for everything."

He took a deep breath to steady his shaking hands.

The door blew open, drawing his attention. Josiah swallowed hard as his eyes landed on the trees.

October 8, 1850

Rosemount Hall to Belhaven Estate

The cool autumn air nipped at his skin as he cradled the bundle against his chest. Isaiah began to stir, soft cries escaping the blanket as Josiah ducked between trees.

“Please, Isaiah,” he whispered, bouncing the bundle on his arm.

Josiah peeked his head around the back of the shack, trying to ensure nobody had seen him. He took a deep breath to steady his shaking hands before slipping deeper into the forest behind it.

His feet carried the pair carefully through the woods, his eyes searching the darkness.

His heart raced as he attempted to quiet his steps.

Rustling leaves and growls grew in the distance behind him.

“This way!” A man yelled. “Saw him run!”

The racing feet drew closer.

A twig snapped beneath his feet as he tried to get his bearings.

Josiah took a deep breath as the smell of smoking meat greeted him.

He spotted smoke rising above the trees nearby.

Several barks sounded behind him, forcing Josiah to push through the trees.

It wasn’t long before his eyes landed on a familiar clearing.

A field of cotton rolled out before him. Small shacks sat on the other side of the field.

The smoke that had risen above the trees billowed from the smokehouse on the other side of the property. He held Isaiah close as the sounds grew louder.

Josiah snuck around the perimeter of the property, making his way into the small, warm building between the big house and the slaves’ quarters. He rushed into the building, behind the hanging meat, holding his brother close.

The warmth of the lingering smoke wrapped around them as Josiah took a deep breath, leaning his head back against the wall as he slid down it.

His eyes locked onto the door as it creaked open. A young red-

haired woman closed the door behind her quietly.

“Oh.” A chirp escaped the woman’s lips as she turned around, spotting the man crouching behind the meats.

His eyes widened as she stepped further into the room.

“I’m sorry, I thought I would be alone.” Carolyn glanced at the meat hanging around the room before looking back at the man.

Her hands shook as they smoothed her apron against her plain dress.

Josiah hid Isaiah with his arm.

He took in her appearance carefully, his eyes narrowing at her fine shoes—too fine for the rest of her clothing.

Josiah’s jaw tensed. “You’re the mistress of the house.”

Carolyn cleared her throat. “Well, no...but I’m as close as we have.”

For a very tense moment, the two locked eyes, only looking away when Isaiah whimpered in Josiah’s arms.

Her eyes softened as she spotted the tiny bundle cradled against his chest.

“He sounds hungry.” Carolyn leaned closer, attempting to catch a glimpse of the child.

“I know he is.” Josiah looked at his brother, a knot twisting in his gut.

Carolyn shifted closer, turning away from him.

“Do you have a way to feed him?” She began pulling some of the dried meat from hooks, placing it carefully in the satchel against her side. She had positioned it carefully, so it was hidden by her apron.

She looked back at them as the baby rooted in Josiah’s arms. Her chest knotted.

Her voice lowered. “I could help...if you’d like.”

His eyes narrowed as they shot to hers. “How?”

She cleared her throat, her weight shifting between her feet. “I... could nurse him. I’ve done it before—recently actually.” Her eyes fell to the floor before meeting his again. “I’d be happy to help—if you’re okay with it, that is.”

“How do I know you won’t try to take him, miss?” Josiah guarded Isaiah with his arm carefully.

He looked over her before he glanced at the door.

Her heart sank at his words. “Call me Carolyn.” She looked

around. "If you want, you can stay between us and the door the entire time."

She stepped closer, her hands in the air as she stood in front of him. "Please. He needs to eat." Her eyes fell on the bundle as the baby's cries softened.

Josiah paused, looking at Isaiah pressing against him. His shoulders tensed as he looked between her and the goat's milk at his side.

His shoulders slumped forward as he sighed.

"Alright." Josiah stood up, careful not to jostle the baby.

Carolyn gasped softly, looking up at him.

He raised an eyebrow at her as he stepped around her.

"I'm sorry, I just...didn't expect you to be so tall."

He nodded as he placed the baby into her arms gently.

He swallowed the lump forming in his throat as he watched Carolyn shift Isaiah against her.

Her hands shook as she fumbled to unbutton the top of her dress, pulling a small section of her corset to the side before she brought the baby close so he could latch.

Carolyn hissed softly as Isaiah bit down.

After a moment, the room filled with suckling noises. Josiah sighed as he crouched down to place a hand against his brother's side.

"Thank you." Josiah's voice came out softer than either of them had anticipated.

"You've run away, haven't you?" Her voice was barely above a whisper. "Not that it matters." She added quickly.

Carolyn glanced past him to the door as her voice lowered. "I'm attempting the same."

"They were going to sell him down the river." Josiah cleared his throat as his eyes drifted to the floor. "Couldn't let it happen."

"I don't blame you for running, then." She brushed her fingers against the baby's cheek. "How are you planning to feed him? He'll need to eat often."

Josiah stayed quiet, watching Isaiah's chest rise and fall steadily. "Got some goat's milk...enough for a few days."

"If you want," she hesitated a moment before continuing, "I could travel with you. Keep him fed while we make our way."

His eyebrows knit together as he met Carolyn's gaze. "Why

would you do that?"

Carolyn looked at the small child in her arms, the way his big brown eyes met hers and the small tuft of curls taking shape on his head tugged at her heart.

"I can't just let a child starve. He doesn't deserve that." Her voice was barely above a whisper. "If there's any way I can help him, I want to."

Her fingers brushed Isaiah's curls gently.

"...and I need to escape too." A chill ran down her spine at the thought of what awaited her if she didn't leave. "Truth be told, I can't make it far on my own and I know that."

Josiah's eyes settled on her, his voice lowering. "If anyone saw, they'd assume the worst."

"I won't let them see." She held her breath, watching him carefully.

He nodded slowly, adjusting the blanket around Isaiah. "I suppose you can join us then, but we move fast."

She nodded as Isaiah drifted off to sleep against her. "I'll keep up."

Carolyn tugged at the top of her dress as Isaiah released her. She carefully fixed her clothes, settling Isaiah against her shoulder.

Josiah couldn't help but notice how slow her movements were.

"Ready when you are." She looked up at him.

Josiah grabbed her provisions, holding them out to her. "I'll take him. Get your bag."

"If that's what you want." She whispered, bringing Isaiah over to him. "Do you know how to make a carrier?"

She held up the blanket she brought in her bag.

"Maybe." He took the blanket Carolyn offered him.

He folded the blanket the long way, tossing one end over his shoulder.

"Turn around." She whispered.

Josiah turned and she guided the blanket across his back with one hand. He took the end of the blanket from her as she reached his side.

He tied the two ends together at his hip.

He shifted the sling on his chest, opening it before Carolyn slipped Isaiah into it carefully.

Josiah froze as he heard voices growing outside. He held a hand up to tell Carolyn to stay quiet.

"Check that shed." A man called. "Plenty to hide behind in there."

Josiah pushed past Carolyn, ducking into the shadows behind meat in the corner.

The door creaked open and heavy footsteps thudded on the floor.

Her heart raced as she turned towards the hanging meat, looking over her shoulder as the strange man entered the building.

Carolyn jumped away from the man, turning to face him. Her skirt shifted to cover where Josiah crouched, holding his breath.

"Sorry to startle you, miss." The strange man removed his hat, holding it in front of him. "We're hunting a runaway—a dangerous one. You see anything?"

Carolyn gasped softly, sitting her hand against chest. "Dangerous, you say? And you think they might've come here?"

"Tracked him here. Don't worry yourself, Miss, we'll catch him before he can steal anything else—or hurt anyone." The man nodded to her. "Mind if I look around a bit?"

Josiah tensed behind her, squeezing his eyes shut.

"Of course you may." She motioned, reaching in front of her to move meat into her basket. "I'll be collecting meat for dinner while you do."

Josiah's heart sank.

"Thank you, miss." The man moved closer, looking behind pieces of meat.

Her heart pounded in her chest as the man drew even closer.

"Would you mind if I ask what the runaway stole?" Carolyn glanced towards him as she wrapped things slowly.

The man cleared his throat as he turned to her. "Ain't exactly a what, Miss." The man hesitated. "He stole a newborn."

She sat her hand on her stomach. "A child? How awful. I hope you manage to find him soon."

"I assure you, we will, Miss." He stood straighter.

"Will you gentlemen be staying on the property long?" She reached towards the meat.

"Don't reckon it'll take us too long to search the grounds." He narrowed his eyes at her.

She pulled her hands back from the meat. "Then, I won't be needing to take extra meat in for dinner.

The man raised an eyebrow as he looked her over.

"A proper lady doesn't let a guest go hungry." Carolyn offered him a smile. "One of the first things my mother taught me."

He nodded to her once. "Do let us know if you notice anything amiss."

"Of course, sir." She offered him a smile.

The man took one more look around the room, walking towards the front slowly.

"Miss." He tipped his cap to her as he exited the smokehouse.

Josiah's shoulders relaxed as he looked up at her.

Carolyn let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding as she turned to face him.

The pair listened as the sounds of men searching nearby slowly faded into the chirps of crickets.

Carolyn stepped out of the smokehouse. She looked around before waving behind her to Josiah.

He poked his head out to check for himself before motioning for Carolyn to follow him.

The grass softened their steps as they moved around the building.

They slipped into the woods. Leaves crunched quietly beneath their feet with every step.