

The Flame

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FADE IN:

INT. ABANDONED BUILDING - MORNING

Silence, punctuated only by soft breathing. JULIA sleeps on a pallet on the floor, fully clothed, under a blanket.

Footsteps outside a closed door. The doorknob moves slightly.

Julia's eyes spring open. In one fluid motion, she tosses the blanket aside and comes to a sitting position, pointing a shotgun at the opening door.

MAN

WHOA! I'm unarmed...

As he raises his hands, he motions to someone outside.

JULIA

YOU OUT THERE! Get in here NOW or he's dead --

A WOMAN slowly comes through the doorway, hands raised. Their clothes and jackets are ragged, but no better or worse than Julia's. Both of their heads are wrapped in cloth.

MAN

Please don't kill us. We're just hungry. Looking for food...we ain't eat in three days.

Julia sighs, relaxes only a little. She pulls a soup can from a lumpy pillowcase, rolls it to them. The MAN's face lights up like he had won the lottery.

JULIA

Now, run before I change my mind.

The man grabs the can. They turn and run as if their lives depended on it. After a minute, Julia relaxes, lays the gun down.

She glances at an old-fashioned hand-wound alarm clock, then frantically digs through the bedclothes, comes up with an old pocket watch. She opens it, shakes her head, moans.

JULIA

Oh, no. NO, NO, NO, NO!

She rises, stumbles to a pile of junk at the side of the room. She rakes debris to the floor, revealing a medium-sized wooden box with hinged door.

She opens the door and removes a tray. A tiny flame glitters in a puddle of wax that was once a candle. She sets the tray on the box, turns, runs back to her pallet.

She dumps the lumpy pillow case's contents on the floor. A few canned goods, can opener, pocket Bible, several candles of various sizes and shapes. She grabs a large candle.

She scrambles back to the box, tries to light the new candle from the tiny, rapidly-dying flame on the tray.

JULIA

Please, please, please, please...

The new candle lights. Julia sighs in relief.

LATER

The wooden box has been carefully covered again in debris. Julia prepares to leave, jacket, gloves, head wrapped in dark scarves, dark sun glasses. She opens the door, slips out.

EXT. ABANDONED BUILDING - DAY

Sunlight glares too bright, washing out colors. Julia settles against a wall, shielded from view by overgrown shrubbery. Hearing voices in the distance, she peeks through the leaves.

The man and woman from the morning walk along, talking in hushed tones. They enter a run-down house across from Julia.

Julia starts to shoulder her pack, but stops at the sound of different voices. She looks through the leaves again.

Two young thugs, heads covered, sun glasses, cutting up. One stops, points at the open door on the house across the way. The other nods. They approach quietly, slip inside.

Startled voices, yelling. A SHOT. A woman's SCREAM, cut short by another SHOT. A few moments later, the two thugs exit, carrying the coats and packs worn by the man and woman.

One thug tries on the woman's sun glasses, likes them, tosses his own sun glasses into the weeds.

SOME TIME LATER

Julia emerges from the overgrowth, quickly picks her way across the road. She looks through the open door, shakes her head, backs away.

She hunts for the sun glasses the thug tossed. She finds them, places them into her pack.

She leaves in the opposite direction from the thugs, working her way carefully using shadows and overgrowth for cover.

INT. STORE ROOM - DAY

Some boxes, other trash, on picked-over shelves. Julia sorts through the debris, finds nothing. She gasps, pulls down a box from the top shelf, rips it open - full of tea candles.

She dances with the candles, delighted by her good fortune. Her dance is cut short by the sight of a small backpack. Slowly, she sets down the box of candles, drops her own pack.

A soft CLINK of metal on metal shelving, deep in the shadowed corner of the room. She raises her shot gun to the shadows.

JULIA

LET ME SEE YOU! NOW, OR I SHOOT!

MARY (10) emerges, shaking in fear, defiantly gripping a metal baseball bat.

MARY

You gonna shoot me?

Julia blinks, then scans the area for others. Nobody.

JULIA

Where are your people, little one?

MARY

Dead. Some bad men killed 'em.

Julia lowers the gun a bit, but not all the way.

JULIA

Do you live here?

MARY

Nah. I got other places to hide.

JULIA

You have a name?

MARY

M...M...Mary.

JULIA

When's the last time you had something to eat?

MARY

I found some crackers yesterday.

A SOUND in another part of the building. They both freeze. Julia makes a SH! gesture, points to Mary's backpack, motions for Mary to join her. Mary nods, grabs her pack.

They move to an outside door, Julia tries the knob. It works. She slowly opens the door, trying to be silent. She puts on her sun glasses, slips out the door.

Mary follows but is blinded by the sun light. Julia quickly produces a scarf and the discarded sun glasses from her pack, puts them on Mary. They silently melt into the shadows.

INT. ABANDONED BUILDING - EVENING

Mary sits on something that used to be a chair, watches as Julia uncovers, opens the wooden box, brings out the candle. Astonished wonder crosses Mary's face as she inches closer.

Julia pours a little soup from a can into a metal cup, holds the cup over the flame.

MARY

It's pretty! What is it?

JULIA

Fire. People used it to keep warm and cook their food.

MARY

Cook?

Julia hands the cup to Mary.

JULIA

Be careful, it's hot.

MARY

Hot?

JULIA

Like the sun on a clear day.

Mary gingerly lifts the cup to her lips, takes a sip. Her eyes light up. Julia smiles, nods. Mary takes more sips.

MARY

How did you make the fire?

Julia looks in her lumpy pillow case, retrieves a small metal box. She opens the box, pulls out a worn matchbook.

JULIA

They used to call these matches.
You can make fire with them and
then move the fire to something
else, to make it bigger.

(shows one match is left)

I haven't found any of these in a
long time. This is the last one.
I'm saving it for an emergency.

(picks up a candle)

I've found a lot of candles. Nobody
wants them, because they're no good
if you don't have some fire. But I
can move the fire from one candle
to another, to keep it alive.

Julia picks up a tea candle, lights it from the big candle.
Mary is spell-bound.

JULIA

We need to get ready for bed.
It'll be dark soon and we have to
hide the fire so nobody sees it.
If they find out we have fire, they
will try to kill us and take it.

Mary nods, goes to a smaller pallet on the floor, near
Julia's. She pulls a blanket over her, watches as Julia puts
items back into her lumpy pillow case.

The door splinters open with a CRASH. The two THUGS rush into
the room. One grabs Julia by the hair, throws her to the
floor. The other spots the candles burning.

THUG 1

(gun in Julia's face)

We're gonna have us a party!

THUG 2

Dude! Forget it. Not important.

THUG 1

What? You flipped out man? It's a
girl, and she ain't ugly!

THUG 2

You idiot! LOOK!

With his knee on Julia's throat, Thug 1 looks, sees the fire.

THUG 1

Fire? WE FOUND FIRE?

THUG 2

Dude, we'll rule this town - maybe
the whole state.

Mary's baseball bat makes a satisfying CLUNK as it bounces off Thug 1's head. He falls, dropping the gun. As Thug 2 turns, Julia kicks out, connects. He falls, groaning.

JULIA

Get your pack! We have to go. NOW!

As the thugs try to pull themselves together, Julia and Mary grab bags, bat, shotgun, and run out the now-destroyed door.

EXT. ABANDONED BUILDING - EVENING

Julia and Mary burst forth into the twilight, turn and run down the deserted street.

Thug 2 appears in the doorway, points a handgun in their direction. The SHOTS illuminate him in bright flashes, but they miss Julia and Mary.

EXT. UNDER THE BRIDGE - NIGHT

Very dark. Julia holds Mary as they huddle under a blanket. A FLASH of lightning, followed by THUNDER, then rain.

EXT. UNDER THE BRIDGE - MORNING

Very early morning. Barely dawn. Julia, wakes, still holding Mary. She sits up, gently wakes Mary.

JULIA

Little one. Wake up, sweetie.
It's time to get going.

MARY

(waking slowly)
Are you going to be my new mommy?

Julia doesn't know how to answer at first.

JULIA

No, sweetie. I wouldn't be a very good mommy. I can be your friend, or maybe your older sister. Would you like that?

Mary nods, rubs her eyes, yawns.

EXT. ABANDONED FARM HOUSE - MORNING

Julia and Mary, heads wrapped, jackets, gloves, sun glasses, hide in the brush, watch an abandoned house.

JULIA

I used to play here when I was your age. Before the sun flares started.

MARY

Sun flares?

JULIA

Yes, sweetie. When I was a girl, we used to play outside all the time, without covering up our heads or anything.

MARY

The sun didn't kill you back then?

JULIA

No, sweetie. But the sun changed. A lot of people died and all the electricity stopped working.

MARY

Lectrissy?

JULIA

Never mind, sweetie. I'll tell you some other time.

(looks at the house)

I think it's safe. I'll go first. Maybe I'll find some matches.

MARY

We lost the fire didn't we?

Julia nods. Mary unzips her jacket, reaches into an inner pocket. She pulls out the small metal box, hands it to Julia.

Julia opens it, sees the matchbook, starts to cry.

She pulls Mary close, hugs her, kisses the top of her head.

FADE OUT.