

Prologue

The icy sadness of winter bled the color from my life. By the summer, even my dreams were in black and white. The imagery in my sleep lures and repels me. I run through rooms painted in intricate earthy patterns, I see faces with faded yellowed eyes peering from behind blackened masks; thorny vines crawled across my arms and legs. These dreams set my nerves on edge; except for one which happens every night so I know it has meaning for me: an owl sitting on my windowsill, a white feather floating above my bed, and four swirling smoky circles rotating above the floor of my room as they coalesce in the middle.

Something whispers in my ear, *“That image is not for you”*.

He saunters down the street with a slow, but agitated gait; his eyes dart from side to side under the umbrella of his long lashes. Stopping in the shadows outside of the 9:30 Club, his gaze never leaves mine as he leans against the bricks to finish his cigarette. I remember him from last night’s dream, his warm breath on my neck, “I’m here, Sparrow.” His golden eyes, unblinking, hold still in the night air. Somehow, I am not afraid.

He can’t help you. Again, who whispers?

Later that night, he comes again as I sleep, he smiles and his eyes glow as if hot embers lurk inside. His black hair skims his collar and shimmers like liquid. Tall and smooth, his ochre skin reflects the moon while the dampened smell of pine envelops me. I can feel him, too as I sleep. His presence bleeds warmth as his hands twists gently into my hair. I miss him when I wake up.

The next night, another strange voice, from another girl, lurking in the corner of my room. “This one,” says the girl’s faraway voice, “seems not afraid.” My eyes, half open, squint to see her. Her form gradually develops, like an old Polaroid photo. Her pale, blanched skin accentuates her pointy features. She looks like a newly hatched baby bird, all angles and bony white. “She’s strong, Istowun-eh’pata.”

“I hope so.”

“It’s almost time. Her mother passed it to her.” A violet haze surrounds the girl. Vines and flowers creep up her arms and snake through her hair. “You come here every night. You must be sure.” She walks closer to me like a predator, her hands clasped together with twisted fingers.

“I think Sparrow could be ours, but it’s too soon to tell.”

“Yes,” says this bird-like girl. “But she is changing already. See?”

See? See what? I wonder. I roll over to face my bedroom wall.

“Fire,” she disappears into my wall. “She has the fire inside.”

Chapter One ~ The Beginning and The End

You wouldn't expect the turn signal to work, but it does. Still clicking like a metronome, the sound indicates the right turn that will never be made. The metal sides of the car are peeled back, the doors are torn, and the windows are shattered. Wheels and hubcaps are either twisted or missing along the roadside as gas leaks from the car. The smell of turpentine and blood hang in the air. Billy Idol's White Wedding is still blaring on the radio, through the dust, through the horror, through the blood stained seats. *Yes, it would be a nice day to start again.*

I look over at my mother and see that the whites of her eyes are almost completely red. Her mouth is frozen, with her lips parted. She looks at me, but there is nothing. No maternal softening in her eyes, no smile forms at the corners of her mouth. Her blood seeps through her shirt and makes a small puddle underneath her, becoming thicker as it mixes with the dirt and dust alongside the road. One of her legs is unnaturally crooked and I can see the bone in her right upper arm. Her tattooed skin and muscle are skewered back from the impact.

This must be a dream, this can't be right. This cannot be my mother. She was driving me to school like every other normal day. The air was humid for February, but I felt the cold as the blood dried in my hair. Sticky, matted, damp. My left arm is contorted, but I can't feel it as the wind covers me with a veil of sandy dirt. I lay back, waiting to wake up. *Please wake up!*

"Is she alive?" I ask the paramedics as they hurry from their ambulances. I can't move, but I need to be next to her. I claw the ground in her direction and my agitation

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makes the younger paramedic nervous. He looks at the older man beside him. Their eyes lock. Finally the older man says, “The mother is in cardiac arrest. Severe internal bleeding. Bring the girl over, this might be it.” Two other paramedics work frantically over my mother, putting in intravenous lines and bandaging her deepest cuts. Her shirt is ripped open and all I want to do is cover her.

My mind races back to earlier in the day. It was the morning we both raced to her old Firebird.

“Do you want to drive?” she asked.

“No thanks, Mom. I still need to put on mascara.”

“How about some BBC News this morning?”

“Oh, come on,” I whine. “How about something to get us going? Hip-hop? A little Alternative?”

I don’t remember exactly how, but the Wave of the 80’s radio became the compromise. We buckled and I started to make my lashes as long as humanly possible. When I am satisfied, I glanced into the passenger side mirror at the road behind me. The lines on the road hypnotize me as they whiz past.

The rest I am not sure is really the truth, because afterwards, the only thing I clearly remember, is death. As I look up at the sky from where I lay, I realize the truth is like the bright sun beating down through the holes in an old rusted tin roof. Part of it shines on you, but you have to go outside and search for the rest. One day, when you feel the blunt force of it, you can own it. Or maybe it owns you.

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I am brought next to Mom, on the side of the road. Her eyes are dull and her lips pale, her shiny hair is dusty. I can see her hands reach out for mine. “It’s a good day to die,” she holds my arm fiercely. “But as you grieve for me, watch for the voices. Then, you must get the ink.”

“The ink?” I sputter in confusion. “What ink? A tattoo? Watch for what voices?”

“Istowun-eh’pata. Packs a knife. Trust him.” Then nothing. There will be no more from her.

I can’t bear to look at her anymore. I wonder what the moment between her life and her death was like, was there a choice? Was there a sudden spark or did everything simply go dim...

Now her words are all I have. I look up into the bright sky as the sun shatters into a million shards of brightness. I pray, for her sake, that it is a good day to die.

I am completely numb. My legs are nothing, but road rash. I am strapped down and loaded into an ambulance as the paramedic smiles at me, “Hang in there, honey. Hang in there.” And I do. For now.

Nobody ever sleeps in the hospital. The lights stay on, the monitors beep, and nurses are always whispering, typing, and checking. Plastic bags drip liquids into my body. Cuts and bruises cover me. A cast is wrapped around my arm, beginning at my right wrist and entombing my entire arm, up to my shoulder.

“I’m so sorry,” I wake up to hear Aunt Shelby next to me, her hand rests gently on my thigh. She must have flown in from Washington, DC. It must be bad.

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“It’s so bright in here,” I whisper to her. The lights hurt my eyes and my eyelids feel like a cat’s tongue scraping over my eye with each blink. Aunt Shelby gets up. I suddenly feel alone. “Please, don’t go.”

“I’m just turning off the lights. You had me so worried, Sparrow.”

She squeezes me affectionately and intertwines her fingers with mine. “She was so strong, your sweet and brave mother. But she will always be with you, and you know if you look for her, you will find her.”

“I wish I were more like her,” I answer back with hoarse difficulty. A sob rises in my chest.

“You are very much like her. You will see that soon enough. But right now, focus on getting your strength back. You need to heal. The rest will take care of itself.”

I’m not sure if I know what she means, or if I really want to know. Her short small fingers fidget as she pushes back her cuticles. “Am I going to be okay?” I can muster no more words.

“Yes, love. A bad concussion, bruised ribs, and a nasty broken arm. Nothing permanent. Do you remember anything?” She asks slowly. Her face morphs from a sympathetic smile, to serious concentration. I grimace with the memory. “Nevermind. Just get some rest. I don’t mean to upset you.”

She pours some water into a pink plastic cup and holds it up for me to drink. While stroking my legs, she straightens my blanket.

“Your mother was strong for a very long time. She kept our reservation strong, too. But there are always forces, from the inside and the outside, that want to destroy it.”

I want to destroy you.

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“Did you hear someone say something?” I shake my head to clear the strange voice of a girl. I swallow a yawn, as my eyes fill with tears.

“No, darling. I’m the only one here. Get some rest. I’m interfering with your recovery. We’ll chat later, love.” She leans in to kiss me, and her eyes stare at me as she comes closer, trying to find a place on my face that isn’t swollen or bruised.

The nurse comes in and breaks the stillness. Her cheerful scrubs and bouncy shoes lighten the mood of the room. “You can have some pain meds now, honey.” She checks my pulse and oxygen levels, and then peeks under my bandages.

“No,” I mumble, trying to keep the stress from my voice. I am tired of being sleepy and confused.

“Okay, but push this button on the side of your bed when you are ready, the one with the silly nurse’s cap. You’ll be first on my list.” The nurse turned to leave and pulled the curtain behind her. A young man is standing in the corner. The one from my dreams.

“Aunt Shelby,” I ask groggily, “Who is he? Behind you, over there.”

She looks behind her and shrugs. “No one is there, love. You’re tired. Close your eyes.” She gets up to leave. “I’ll be back later.”

His presence agitates me. He stands and stares at me. One of my monitors starts beeping and the nurse rushes back in. She checks all the leads connecting me to the machines, chastising me for refusing the pain meds. “You’ll heal faster if you rest. Pain causes inflammation which will slow your healing, you know.” Her voice sounds slightly annoyed. “There aren’t any awards for getting better without meds.”

“Who is that over there, behind you?” I ask the nurse, pointing towards him, still watching me.

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“Where?” She turns to look and then smiles back down at me like I’m a child afraid of snakes under the bed. “There’s no one there, honey.” She pats my foot. “Listen, you just need some rest.”

Everyone thinks you are crazy. No one hears her. No one sees him.

Chapter Two ~ Three Months Later

The cab drives me to the airport with the windows all the way down. It's eighty degrees, perfect and humidity-free. A beautiful day on the Reservation, the blue sky is interrupted only by cottony white clouds and the bright yellow sun of early summer.

"Where are you flying to?" Asks my cab driver.

I resent the intrusion, so I share only a sliver of truth. "Washington, DC. Staying with my aunt for a bit."

The driver squints and looks into his rear view to study my expression, as if he knows there is much more to my story. The full truth is that I have a one-way ticket to Reagan National Airport to start the next phase of my life. Aunt Shelby, a political lobbyist, is also pulling strings to get me enrolled in Georgetown University.

"Sounds like you have a lot to look forward to. The nation's capital is a fine city."

"Yep." I answer flatly. My eyes glaze, as the burnt rust and summer yellow of the reservations landscape reflects in my window, as I say good-bye. Good-bye for now.

You can't run away from me. I will shadow you.

I bury my life, as it once was, deep in my heart. I pray for my people who remain.

The first morning I wake up in Aunt Shelby's house, I am on the floor, wrapped in an expensive duvet and comforter. Everything inside me feels like it has been crashed into; my organs, my spine, even the muscles in my neck feel pained and pierced. I reach for the alarm, which hasn't gone off yet, and shower quickly. I throw on some clothes

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and stroke on a fast coat of mascara. In the kitchen, Aunt Shelby cooks breakfast, smiling and then rolling her eyes at my purple hi-tops.

“Your shorts are too short,” she mentions. I’m just glad she says nothing about my camisole.

“Wow. Bacon.” I kiss her on the cheek. “I thought you didn’t eat meat anymore.”

“Bacon doesn’t count, Sparrow. Even vegans eat bacon,” she jokes, laughing at herself. “And sweetheart, don’t forget a sweater over that teeny tiny top.”

“I think you’ve lost it,” jokes Jenny. “You’ve gone bat-shit crazy.” Jenny walks with me back to the metro station after our Psychology 101 class. “Those are freaky dreams. But they are just dreams. Everything about leaving the Reservation and losing your mom gets jumbled about in your subconscious and your mind works it out while you sleep. That’s it.”

I am smitten with Jenny. She sat next to me the first day of class and shot me the widest smile - so wide, that her eyes disappeared. We are physical opposites. She is a porcelain doll compared to my more olive skin-tone. Her hair is cropped and choppy, while mine is longer and all one length. She is short where I am tall, and musical where I am completely tone deaf.

“I know. I think I believe you. But there is something real in them...I think.” Yet, in the bright light of the city’s streets, I think she’s right.

Even Jenny thinks you’re crazy.

I rub my temples. *Where does this voice come from?*

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“Let’s get back to living, okay? Back to some *real* people. Come with me over to Neptune Studio. We can hang out with Max and Layne, it’ll be fun.” I nod and we walk in a comfortable silence.

“Eight ball, side pocket.” I maneuver the cue forward. I miss, of course. Max and Jenny’s friend, Layne, is my playing partner. Layne circles the table and chalks the cue, not at all distracted by the loud guitar tracks being recorded in the back of the studio.

As I lean into the table, I hear a soft whisper in my ear. “*Sparrow...*” I drop my stick and stumble, almost falling backwards.

“Sparrow, what’s wrong?” Layne is gifted in reading the mood of a room, even though my spooked jolt is apparent to everyone. His voice is quiet, but steady, as his long blonde dreadlocks ebb and flow around his shoulders with restless energy. He looks at me closely, but doesn’t ask again. “Let’s take a rain check. Would that work?” he asks.

Layne pulls me over to the room’s pillowed corner. I lay down as he pulls out a notebook filled with lyrics and drawings. He sits cross-legged and starts to hum. He sings some unintelligible words in a comforting and gravelly voice. I snuggle on top of his right thigh and drift off to sleep.

He will see who you really are soon enough.

Layne is unmoved as I wake up. His eyes glance sideways to me as I sit up and shake my head. I push my hair behind my ears and hold his gaze. I feel no pain or fear. My dreams sit like shadows in another room, behind a closed door. Gone. Layne’s arm leaves his guitar to rest on my ankle and I feel heat everywhere. His eyes seem to move

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into the air between us. “Look,” he smiles sadly with his head cocked to the side as he strokes my hair, “I saw the inside of your arms, and those cuts and scars. I know we sort of just met, but you should stop doing it. Seriously.”

I feel a hot flash of anger, then embarrassment. “I guess you think I’m pretty pathetic.” It’s the best response I can formulate. He doesn’t know that when I cut myself, I feel release, as if cutting myself proves that I am still alive. The tiny nicks from the razor and the red dots of blood make me feel like my mother’s death was not my fault.

“It doesn’t matter what I think. The feelings that push you to do this to yourself are separate from the girl you are. Don’t give those feelings a home, inside you or outside of you.”

In that moment, as he leans down to me, I fall in love with his scent.

Max, Jenny, Layne and I also spend the next day together, playing video games, making vegetarian sushi, and lounging around the studio.

“Do you miss your reservation?” Max asked out of the blue. “I mean, you fit in so well here with us that it’s hard to imagine you somewhere else. You know?”

Jenny moves closer to me. She smells like honeysuckle and smiles with the happiness of a thousand new stars, but my ears fill with the deafening sound of rustling wind and trees. No one else hears this noise, I feel like my head is stuffed with cotton. I look at Layne. The brightness of his skin is blinding.

Say nothing. He won’t believe you and he can’t help you. Pathetic girl.

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The next few weeks pass strangely for Layne and me. We are both aware that something is drawing us closer, but we also feel that something unknown is sitting between us.

You will never be enough for him. He only sees half of you.

Chapter Three ~ Istowun-eh'pata Reveals

Seven nights have passed, and I've had no dreams. Midterms finish and my eyes burn from lack of sleep. Each slow blink scratches the parched desert of my eyes.

"It's dusk," he whispers, looking out my window at the darkening clouds.

I jump and startle. Not because of his voice, but because of its wistful tone. His eyes lock on mine.

"I'm awake, you know. And I'm not under the influence of prescription pain medications either. I can see you, but I don't know who you are."

"Why aren't you frightened of me?"

"I don't know. Maybe I believe you have something to do with my mother."

He smiles at me, and shyly looks towards the floor. "My name is Istowun-eh'pata. Call me Mateo."

"Why do you come here?" I ask again, but I'm too exhausted to be afraid of the answers.

"Because I am the strongest. The more you are threatened, the more visible I will become. With me near, no one will harm you. I will be here until you are strong enough to go home."

"No one's been threatening me."

"No one you recognize is threatening you," he corrected.

"And maybe this *is* my home."

"And maybe you have one foot in two worlds."

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As we rush into our primary grade Blackfoot language class on the reservation, most of us aren't wearing green for St. Patrick's Day. I remember how our teacher greeted us in the doorway.

"Where's your green?" asked Mrs. De La Croix, while we run past her. We either narrowly miss her playful attempts to pinch us or we hold up our hands, triumphantly colored with green marker.

"Hustle, girls," she calls out to the lingerers in the hallway.

"I say, you say," she announces to us. Her stick points to a color chart in English and Blackfoot. She taps down the list.

"Green," she begins. "Sai sikimokinaattsi."

"Green," we reply. "Sai sikimokinaattsi."

We must take turns reading the chart alone. We must close our eyes to listen to the rhythm of each word.

"I do this so you remember. Not to embarrass you."

A large painting of a Blackfoot Jesus, with Blackfoot Indian children, graces the wall next to posters of three prayers: The Glory Be, The Hail Mary, and The Our Father. We also learned the language of the Creator and Napi, but we couldn't pray to them here.

Mateo is right. I've had one foot in two worlds my whole life.

"So, maybe you're right," I look out the window. "But how do I get rid of you? Can everyone see you?"

He clears his throat and looks strangely hurt. "I won't be as visible after you have the ink. You won't need me. You'll be strong enough on your own."

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No you won't. You never will.

“Did you hear that?” I ask him. “And what ink?”

“Yes, I do hear her too. But right now the voice is merely a threat. You can overcome her.”

“So I’m not making up these voices?”

“No, the voice is real. But, it isn’t part of this world.” He holds up my right arm and turns it over, exposing my scars and cuts. He looks down at me closely; his forehead is damp with sweat. He bends down and kisses my scars.

Chills and fever envelop me. Black and white words swirl around my mind, tangling in my thoughts like fishing line. I grasp at them, but lose them. Cold and hot flash. Shadows undulate on my walls, swirling on my ceiling. My name, *Sparrow*, appears on the ceiling in a shiny red scrawl.

I stare at my name above me. Mateo’s lips are still on my inner arm. Smoke dances around us like flames.

Mateo looks to me and says, “It’s beautiful, smoky shades of blood like the ink. It’s almost time to get your tattoo. Go to Stuart Gilkison at The Black Line. Just like your mother. He knows what to do.”

Istowun-eh’pata can’t save you. Not from me.

On my way to school, I pass The Black Line Tattoo Shop again. A small sign announces Stuart’s availability. I open the unlocked front door and stand in the entrance as a small Asian woman leaves the check-cashing place next door. She looks at me and turns quickly in the opposite direction, almost running away from me.

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“Closed!” A man’s voice yells from the back.

“Are you Stuart Gilkison?” I shout back. My voice sounds tiny and frail in my own ears.

“Why?”

“You tattooed my mother. She sort of sent me...” I search for words. “Before she passed...” The screen door creaks shut behind me and suddenly slams, bouncing several times in the frame.

“I’ve tattooed a lot of people.” He walks out from the back, brushing off his hands. “Can’t remember most of them.”

I don’t know whether Stuart is dangerous or crazy. His worn leather jacket barely covers the tattoos that snake out from his sleeves and curl up the back of his neck. Ink black eyes are drawn on the back of his neck surrounded by black and gray knot work. A chaos star is on his calf, a black feather on each point.

“Well, I am here for a tattoo. And I really don’t care if you will remember me.” I answer, sounding petulant and young. I feel a chill run up my leg, the heat from the radiator clicks and echoes through the room.

“How old are you?” He squints his eyes and crosses his arms.

“Eighteen.”

Stuart studies my face and walks to a bookcase filled with art books. Squatting to look for something, he rests his hands on his legs.

“Here.” He gets up and brings me a small book. “This is a good art book work from. I think I remember your mother now, but that was a long time ago. You look like her, but smaller.” He stepped back to appraise me further. “But she brought her own ink

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with her. Native Ink. She told me to keep the leftovers safe and that the ink would only get stronger. She even told me to save it for someone – and that I would know who when the time came. So I did. I guess that person is you.”

“That’s what I’ve been told.”

You’ll never have that ink.

As soon as I take hold of the small book, the size of an old photo album, I miss my mother more than ever.

“You aren’t ready for a tattoo.” Stuart says as I tremble and my lips quiver. My legs quake beneath me as I back out the door, tossing the book on a side table. I stumble several blocks to Jenny’s and I feel someone’s eyes on me. I just don’t know whose. Not for sure anyway.

They are my eyes.

Jenny’s mom smiles as she directs me to the basement where Jenny is developing her film. I know I look pale as I clench the railing down the stairs; my knuckles are blanched and bony. The red light above the door stops me from barging in the darkroom, but I peek in a small window to watch her. I admire Jenny’s concentration as she pins the photos onto a clothesline to dry. Her short hair accentuates her cheekbones and the bluish lights make her look like an angel.

I watch her in silence. The smell of the ocean shoots through the air and I can feel the change in the room. It’s Layne, behind me. I look over my shoulder and we are eye to eye. He smiles without opening his mouth and his dimples deepen. My breathing

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quickens and I feel my skin burn as he comes closer. Every inch of my skin reaches up towards him.

His arms wrap around my waist, underneath my shirt. His hands feel calloused against me from playing guitar, but I enjoy his roughness.

“God,” he breathes into my hair. His mouth leans into my ear. “You are so soft.” Our feelings and actions balance on the point of a needle. We could go one way or another, but right now, nothing seems more impossible than turning away from him. His eyes are half closed and by the way the heat is emanating from his hands, I know he feels the same.

The red light turns off above Jenny’s door and she pops out of her darkroom. She looks at both of us. “Am I interrupting anything?”

Instinctively, I take a step away from Layne, but he pulls me closer to him by my belt loops and I feel his fingertips glide along my hips underneath my jeans. His smile sits by my ear as he rests his cheek against my hair, his chin on my shoulder. Everything is how it should be.

For now you are happy. But you won't be for long.

I spend the weekend following Layne’s band as it winds through Richmond and Virginia Beach. The volume in the clubs drowns me in sound. I am never certain what I should be doing while he plays. I feel like a lurker, a hanger-on. Cute girls are everywhere – funky, stylish girls who sing along with him and seem to speak a secret language with him as he sings. I stand against the walls and chew the split ends of my hair.

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Go home and cut yourself then.

Then Layne sings and looks at me. The sound of his voice and the dank smell of the venue suck me in, I stare at his face, luminous under the stage lights, his lips on the microphone. As the show ends, he comes offstage to me, sticky with sweat and shaking with fatigue. I want him all to myself, no more sharing.

Upstairs in the dressing room, the fans descend again. I skirt out to the bar, though Layne tries to gather me in. He strokes my arms and wraps his arms around my waist. He stands behind with his chin on my shoulder, claiming me in front of everyone. The other girls look me up and down. Nervously, I pull away.

“Aren’t you into me anymore?” he asks when the crowds dissipate. He laughs, but part of him sounds hurt.

“I feel like I am keeping you from something here. I don’t fit in with the energy here and I know you keep checking on me and worrying about me...and I feel, I don’t know, uncomfortable.”

He should worry about you. And you should worry about me.

Layne, always searching for what is true, strokes the ends of my hair. He holds me gently, his arms around me. “You will see what is good here, in your own time I guess. But I’m here for you.”

But you won’t be there for him.

When I open my eyes the next morning, the air feels heavier. It is daybreak, but darker than usual. I go into my bathroom and turn on the warm water.

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“Not too deep,” the razor whispers as it slides in tiny motions across my inner arm. “Just until you feel it coming out.” I hear the words pounding in my ears mixed with the blast of the water falling.

“Crimson is the most seductive of colors,” I breathe into the mirror as it is blurred and fogged from the steam.

Yes...do it for the sake of beauty.

I see a flash of the accident rip across my mind. Dust, ripped metal, broken glass. The windy noise in my head makes me dizzy as I clutch the sink for balance. I gag and cough, tears sting my eyes. I go back to bed, relieved somewhat, to have bled away some of my burden.

When I wake up again, it's the afternoon and I'm wearing the same clothes that I'd worn the day before. I've slept more than twelve hours, but I still don't feel rested. Downstairs, the news drones softly in the kitchen, a low buzz under the chatty sounds of Jenny and Max along with the laughter of Aunt Shelby. With a calm that feels miraculous, I get out of bed and open my door. At the top of the stairs, with his back to me, sits Mateo. I ignore him and walk past as if I can't see him.

“Don't ignore me.”

I stand, deciding what to do. Stay or go. The indecisive quiet feels like hours. He says nothing more as he stands, but slowly, he reaches his arms around me. He isn't a ghost, certainly. He feels solid, warm, slender and firm. I don't speak or move away. He smells of a forest and in his arms was a sense of eternity. Whatever he wants, I am not afraid.

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“So you can touch me and you feel real...even when I’m not dreaming?”

He quickly releases me, almost pushing me away. “This is enough.” He rubs his hands up and down his cheeks. “I’m not here to get close to you.”

“You are doing a pretty good job it,” I joke as I fidget with the frayed edge of my t-shirt. “I mean, you’re in my bedroom at night.”

“I guess I still have some human instincts. Certain feelings transcend time, I guess.”

“What exactly are you?”

“A guide. A native spirit. Your mother sent me.”

I stare at him, I look in his dark eyes and see years of my people fighting and running. I see the screams of women and the war cries of men.

“I don’t know how my emotional connections or physical connections affect things,” he says, “but I’m not here to find out.”

Fall in love with him too, if you want. He also won’t last.

We stand at the top of the stairs as I wonder if he is as unwilling to end this moment as I am. I much prefer him in the daytime, even as the light is fading under the darkness of a coming thunderstorm.

“So,” he starts. “You’re getting some coffee. At Higher Grounds.”

“What? How do you know? I don’t know.”

“I just know. It’s my job to know what you do. However, most some things are predictable.” He tucks an errant strand of hair that didn’t make it into my ponytail behind my ear.

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“To be honest, you seem to be the only unpredictable thing in my life. You could be who I need protection from.”

“No. Not me. The reservation needs you back when the time is right. And until that time, I have to keep you safe.”

“Why? Why do I have to go back? There is nothing there.”

“That is why you must go back.” He looks at me sideways through a lock of fallen dark hair. He leans in to kiss my cheek and is gone. A pocket of cold air where he once stood enveloped me as I walk down the stairs. “To put something back that is missing.”

You'll never make it.

Chapter Four ~ As It Once Was, It Will Be

“Tylenol?” Max offers. “You look like you have a pounder of a headache.”

Max’s tall frame steps towards me, his reddish hair glows under the skylights of the kitchen. But over his shoulder is a pale skinned waifish figure with straight blue-black hair. She is delicately framed but not vulnerable. Her violet eyes seethe with anger and disgust at the two of us. Max, imposing and tall in his thrift store trench coat, seemed dwarfed by the space she takes up in the room.

My eyes burn and my mouth tastes metallic as she looks at me. I try to point but am frozen. Max quickly turns to see what has captured my attention. Nothing. He sees nothing. The angry girl disappears, first fading around the edges until she becomes translucent, and next...gone.

I will be back.

Jenny breezes into the kitchen. “Coffee?”

“Sure,” I say. “Did you text me? My phone was in my jacket. I’ve been so tired lately.” My mouth is dry and my eyes are itchy.

“I know, sweets.” Jenny hands me my jacket. The wooden chairs squeak as I push them in around the table.

Jenny gives me an encouraging squeeze. Part of me wants to stay here and wait for Mateo. I have so many questions. Questions only he can answer. There is something in his presence that makes me feel safe, but is it real?

It doesn't matter. He can't save you. He will leave you just like your mother did.

Ink SJ Davis

We head to Max's loft. His living area is cluttered but spotless at the same time, at least from what I can see in the warm light of the galley kitchen. One wall is nothing but shelves with old CD's, iPod chargers, and music books piled everywhere. On the other side of the room, two battered skateboards lie next to a snowboard.

Max is in front of his MacBook Air using GarageBand when my phone vibrates. It's Layne.

"You haven't answered your phone all day. I texted you all night." He sounded a mixture of weary, confused, and annoyed. "Where have you been?"

I feel like my throat is closing in on me. I can't breathe and the air around me feels crushing. "Well, I finally slept late and now we are just hanging at Max's. Do you want to talk to him?"

"No," he snaps. "I called YOU remember?" His tone is sharp, but he sighs and his tone softens and quiets. "I miss you. Not to sound obsessed, but you shine. You are my light. Things are dark when I'm not with you."

He must be blind.

At first I don't know what to say. Max and Jenny are next to me, trying not to pay attention. I whisper into the phone as I walk away. "I don't know that you see me for what I am, Layne. There's a lot you don't know about me. But I miss you too. I miss you being here." I sigh and then he laughs.

He'll never love the real you. Not when he sees all of you.

Layne changes the subject and we are instantly more comfortable. "I've been thinking of my next tattoo. I'm getting psyched for more ink."

"Where will you do it? Vegas? New York?"

Ink SJ Davis

“Ha ha, but no. Stuart at The Black Line is one of the best. I like to support local business.”

“He did my mom. Years ago.”

“Wild. I had a bizarre dream...really tripped out. The idea for the tattoo just came to me.”

“What was the dream, Layne?” In the corner of Max’s loft I see the pale girl with dark circles under her eyes. She is on her toes, as if dancing ballet, her arms lifted over her head as her fingers touch gracefully. She has no shoes. I shake my head, blink, and then she’s gone.

“Well, it was more of a feeling, really. It was as if my emotions found a form, an actual dimension in space.”

He’s as crazy as you.

“I don’t understand.”

“I’ve been crazy lately. You know that. Touring, hotels, diners, late nights. Half the time I don’t know how I feel or where I am. Sometimes scared, sometimes pissed, sometimes ecstatic. But never in the right zone.”

“Layne, I miss you. Please come home.”

“Soon, Sparrow. I will. But this dream...it was filled with things that were wrong or inverted -people with feathers for hair, markings and vines on their bodies and the air had color, like a rainbow. You could breathe in color. Unreal things.”

“Come home soon, Layne. I think you might be catching my dreams.”

Your dreams will destroy him too.

“Soon, I’ll be there soon.”

Ink SJ Davis

“What is that?” I ask Stuart.

“The ink for Layne’s tattoo.” He lifts the bottle and pours some of the ink into a series of miniature paper cups. The shop is dim and I can’t make out the colors very well but the liquid drops down like huge black tears from a bottle. I am so happy that Layne is home for a week’s break in his tour, and after seeing me; the next thing on his mind was the tattoo shop. When we both come in, Stuart acts like we’ve never met before. No eye contact, no greeting, no nod, nothing.

The machine hums as the needles touch Layne’s bare back.

“Do you want me to wait outside?” I ask. Watching him get his tattoo seems almost too intimate.

“No. Stay.” There is something very sexy about watching the needles as they pierce the surface of his skin. His face is a mixture of concentration and pain.

“Are you okay?” I feel a need to move around now. I feel tingly and my legs feel numb. The room begins to smell strange, like heat and blood.

And you think that you can do this? That you can get your mother’s ink? Fool of a girl.

“I’m good,” Layne manages between breaths. There is a fine line between the excitement of being tattooed and of pain. Layne is in that place.

Afterwards Layne comes to my house to rest. We go upstairs; he walks with a slight stoop.

“Get rid of the bandage,” he says between his teeth.

Ink SJ Davis

“I can’t. I mean, you aren’t allowed. Doesn’t it need to heal more before it’s exposed to air and bacteria?”

“I don’t care. I can’t breathe with it on. It’s too tight. It’s hot.”

“Okay. Hold still.”

He takes his shirt off and I peel back the bandage carefully. It’s damp, not with blood, but with pinkish-clear plasma mixed with tiny spots of ink. “Your shirt will stick to your back if you put it back on. We should have left it on.”

“No. I’m glad it’s off. How does it look?”

“Painful. Sore. Red.”

Yours will be worse, if you dare to even do it.

He motions for me to lie next to him on my bed, he is stretched out on his stomach. “You can take your shirt off too if it would make you feel better.”

I lie down and look at him. I move closer to him but am careful to avoid the shiny red skin around his new crow tattoo. I blow on it gently; he winces as his skin tightens with goose bumps. The Celtic knots and pattern around the crow intertwine with arrows pointing in four directions, like a compass. Finally, a bridge of sparrows flies across his shoulder blades.

“Tell me everything about you, Sparrow,” he whispers. “The good. The bad. I want all of it. I feel like I am only getting the edges of you.”

“I’m just slow, Layne. It takes more time for me to connect to people.”

“Trust me, Sparrow. The most important thing for you to know is you can trust me. Always.”

He’ll never trust you. You can’t even trust you.

Ink SJ Davis

Layne's band, Junk Shot, will start touring again along the Southeast in the next week. Max, Jenny, Layne and I squeeze in as much time together as we can. From Aunt Shelby's, we hop on the metro red line to the National Gallery of Art. We enter the room, which holds Edvard Munch's Master Prints, and I can taste the mood of each print. Silently we walk back and forth, studying and gazing. The colored prints and his hand painted variations swallow me – all evoke basic human themes of birth and awakening, next attraction and love...then jealousy, separation, and death.

“Are you Catholic?” Max asks me as we leave the exhibit. “Or do you do the Blackfoot ceremonies?” Max's sudden question doesn't surprise me. He asks pointed questions of everyone and he, in turn, is the most open to explaining his worldview.

“Well,” I begin awkwardly, with three sets of eyes and ears locked on me. “I am both really. Both Catholic and traditional.”

Traitor.

Jenny walks closer to me and links her arm in mine. “Sometimes I can't help but feel guilty being part of the white Anglo culture.”

“Stop, Jenny, really. What's funny is that Catholicism sort of mirrors the Blackfoot faith: ‘I am the Sun, the Moon, and the Morning Star’ refers to our creator, but it's very Biblical in its trinity.”

“Do you pray?” asks Layne.

“Yeah, I pray. Everybody prays. Even Atheists...they just lie to themselves about it afterwards.”

Everybody lies, especially you.

Chapter Five ~ Same As It Ever Was

I know the moment Mateo enters the house now. I can taste the cold and then the heat of him. Finally, I feel the dark feeling of descent into an unknown place settling in my heart. *Go*, I hear Mateo's voice in my sleep. *Go to The Black Line*.

Jenny comes with me the next day. I'm embarrassed by my hesitation. I walk down the sidewalk. Stop. Look in a window. Stop. Nervously chatter. Stop. Maybe I'm not ready. But something inside me feels like the tattoo will make me stronger. I remember being held by my mother, being swayed in her soft and warm arms. The colors of her tattoo danced on her upper arm, while the wolf on her forearm protected me.

The dim lighting of The Black Line makes the dust look like fireflies when the outside light shoots through the blinds. Jenny and I blink, adjusting to the light.

Stuart turns around. "What can I do for you?" He looks only at Jenny.

"It's me," I say loudly. "I am here to choose a design."

Stuart circles towards me and looks at my arms. He picks each one up and twists it over, looking at them up and down. He pulls up my sleeves and runs his palm along my skin. He drops my arms as if they started to burn his hands, throwing them almost from his grasp.

"Do you want me to cover those cuts and scars? You will wreck your ink if you cut yourself."

"How dare you!" Jenny says in my defense, unaware of the truth behind Stuart's words.

Ink SJ Davis

He's not fool. He's right. I hear the voice whisper like a breeze through the room.

“Sparrow was in an *accident*,” Jenny hisses, almost gasping for her voice, her chin to her chest and eyes glaring. “Asshole,” she mutters under her breath. She grabs my arm, “Let’s go.”

Stuart is nonplussed by my cuts and by Jenny’s outburst, as he knows the truth. “Do you want your back done instead?”

I follow him back to the drawings. Jenny stays in the front, still glaring at Stuart. Large portfolios litter the table; plastic sheets cover intricate patterns and sketches. “Listen,” he growls. “I will tattoo you. But don’t put me in a position to fail. And don’t waste the ink.”

“What are you talking about?” I stiffen, not looking at him, flipping through pages. “Put you in what position? I’m a paying customer and my skin is the same as anyone else’s.”

“You better wake up and realize it’s not. There is no room for error with you. Your ink must be perfect. Perfectly timed and perfectly placed.”

It will never happen. You are imperfectly you.

Mateo lies on his side, on my bed, looking at me as I enter the room.

“Can you wear a bell or something?” I ask.

“I thought you were getting pretty good at sensing when I’m here.”

“Not today. I went to The Black Line.”

“Good,” he answers. *When the desire becomes too great, the night will not contain me. I will prowl in the sun like the others.*

Ink SJ Davis

“I heard that. I hear you when you aren’t speaking.” I slide over on my bed and breathe deeply, weary of his riddles and pretty words. Mateo glides next to me, pressing his hard body into my back. I look at him over my shoulder, reaching for his cheek. He feels cold. He feels like my mother when they covered her on the roadside. I feel so alone.

A tear falls. Then I sob. The sounds of my pain remind me of a rain soaked canyon. A growling noise comes from deep in Mateo’s throat. I stare at his lips, crimson and full of warning.

The sound of branches whipping against my window distracts me. We hear strange sounds outside, growling noises that aren’t from an animal.

“This is why you aren’t meant to be here for long. This is why you need the ink as soon as you can tolerate its power,” Mateo says, pulling the curtains together.

You will never be able to handle its power.

“Well, I choose to be here. Aunt Shelby is all I have now. I don’t know if I will ever find a place that I belong to anymore. I’m just not a person who fits in...you know, typical Native girl.

Mateo’s fingers reach for mine. So lightly that it only feels like a temperature change, no pressure. He leans over and whispers to me. His head hangs down, almost ashamed. “Sometimes it’s hard for me to be here. Like this.”

All of a sudden a crunching sound comes from outside my window. Mateo backs up against the wall, peering through the crack in the curtain.

Ink SJ Davis

“What are you looking at?” I peer down to the dogwoods then back at Mateo as his eyes search the trees. His eyes narrow at whatever is out there. His body stands still, fierce, and strong.

“There are forces that seek to destroy you, to keep you from gaining strength.”

“I really wonder what you’re talking about.”

You should really wonder if you’re sane.

“You must choose your mark,” he says.

“My mark?”

“Yes, your ink. Time is running out.”

“Mateo, are you really looking out for me or for something else?”

“For you and for all the things that go bump in the night. Always have. Always will.” His hands cup my face then glide down my arms and hold my hands. I step backwards but stop, my hands still inside of his. “We are all afraid of the night, the dark, the unknown. Sometimes we’re just afraid of ourselves. We are our own worst enemy.”

“I don’t know what to be afraid of anymore.”

Me. Be very afraid of me. Be afraid of yourself.

“Get some sleep. You have classes tomorrow.”

“Where will you be?”

“Inches away from you.”

Later, I dream about my mother. She stands at the side of the road outside of the reservation. It’s snowing. Giant snowflakes fall in layers over her dark hair and glisten on

Ink SJ Davis

her eyelashes. Wolves circle around her as she speaks to me. Her mouth moves but I hear no sound.

But you can hear me.

Chapter Six ~ Hide and Seek

“And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you: for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’” Matthew 26:27

I hear these words and I wake drenched in sweat.

“No, Sparrow,” Father Saint Crow’s voice echoes in my head. I see myself standing. Small. Young. Innocent. Looking at the cold stone of the sanctuary floor. I see myself as a girl in kindergarten: sagging knee socks, dusty shoes, too small dress, pony tail half fallen. “No. There is no one following you, Sparrow. No spirits, no ghosts. It’s your imagination. Ask God to forgive you of your sins and relieve you of your impure thoughts.”

As it is now, it will be forever.

Maybe Mateo isn’t the first one.

My bedroom feels like a block of ice.

Chapter Seven ~ Factory of Faith

A quiet knock on the door sends me reeling. Butterflies attack my stomach as I fall into a hectic frenzy of sorting the dirty from clean clothes in the heap on my floor. Jeans, check. Uggs, check. Light pink hoodie over a camisole, check.

I wrestle with the deadbolt and finally open the door. There he is. Layne. Mateo feels like a ghost as I look at Layne standing in front of me.

“Layne! I had no idea you were back!”

“Um. Good morning.” Layne smiles. Something is different but I can’t put my finger on it.

“Good morning back at you.” I open my arms and wrap them around his neck. He squeezes me in return, but quickly and with a platonic pat on my back. Maybe the time away from me on his tour has made him lose interest, or he’s probably here to tell me he’s met someone else.

Maybe it’s just you. You are no good for him.

“Let’s go for a hike or something. Okay?” Layne’s voice is tight, his muscles in his neck and jaw pop out as he clenches. I mentally prepare myself for another loss. My nose starts to run and my eyes water but I clear my throat and nod.

“The state park? Leesylvania?”

“Sure.” As we walk in the direction of his car I notice he walks several steps in front of me. His body language is disconnected. He opens his door and grabs his keys. The door slams. “We can walk to the trails. There’s no sense wasting gas.”

Ink SJ Davis

“Great. I certainly want to be green.” My voice catches in the back of my throat. He looks back at me and in a flash looks down at his keys.

We walk down to the trails and while he walks ahead, I lag behind. I feel a stabbing sadness.

“Look.” Layne stops and turns. I bump into him but I don’t move away. My hip touches his. “I can be patient,” he says in a halted cadence with his hands in fists at his side. “It takes great effort, but I can. However,” he breathes deeply, “I need more from you in return.” He stares at my eyes, at my confused expression.

“More than what? You’re gone most of the time.”

“Maybe this wasn’t a good idea” His voice is barely audible and he looks like a guy who has given up. “Do you just want to go back home?”

“No. I don’t want to go home yet.”

Which home, Sparrow?

I walk towards him until we are face to face by the river, anxious not to waste any more time. “I don’t want to go home. I’ll answer whatever you ask.” The rest of our walk is hilly and damp along the edges of the Potomac River. He holds the low hanging branches back from my face and balances me as we climb along the slippery rocks, but he lets go quickly. His touch no longer lingers on my skin.

I stop in a clearing to feel the sun. “Can we sit for a while?”

“Sure.” He takes off his black hoodie to use as a make shift blanket. I rest my head on his knees. His skin is tight and pale in the sun.

“Is this okay?” I look up at him, he has leaned back, face to the sky, eyes closed.

“It’s fine. It’s okay.” He shifts his weight away from me, pulling back.

Ink SJ Davis

My fingertips find their way to his. I trace the veins in his hand up to the pale tapered muscles of his arm. I sit up and our faces are so close that I feel his breath blend with mine. I lean in until my lips brush his. I feel him take a sharp breath and his chest expands. Then he pushes himself into me, pinning me against the bottom of a large pine tree. His breathing is fast as he stares into my eyes, but he pulls away, supporting himself against the tree, bowing his head.

I lay down, the sun on me. He looks at me without smiling. He bends down and lies on top of me, weightlessly with his arms on each side of my head. We are inches apart, forehead-to-forehead.

“I need to be with you,” he finally says. “But I don’t know what it is between us. I don’t want this to be just a hook-up.”

“I never thought this was a hook-up.”

“And the fun stuff,” he smiles at me, “will be even better if we are open with each other. About everything, even if it’s scary.”

“I know. I’m trying.”

“It’s the only way two people can fit together in a way that can’t be broken. I want that with you, Sparrow. I want something unbreakable.”

Then he shouldn’t be with you. That much is certain. You are completely broken.

“I don’t know where to start.” I could tell him about Mateo, but would he believe me? Do I believe me?

Somewhere inside I feel like if I give Layne what he wants, trust and honesty, that he will stay.

Ink SJ Davis

He looks pained. “I don’t push you about the cutting. I kind of understand it. After the accident you probably have a lot to be angry about. Maybe you’ve closed yourself off from others, I don’t know.”

“I don’t feel like I’m on solid ground.”

“Did someone else hurt you?” His entire body tenses with his words.

“No. Not yet. But I’ve been warned someone might.” I play with my earring and look away.

“What? Someone wants to hurt you? Why?”

“That’s just it. I don’t know.” Tears fall. He lifts up my chin and looks at my face, wet with tears and blotchy.

“Who is it?”

“I don’t know. Really. But it has something to do with my mother and the reservation.”

You’re telling him too much. Shut up.

“Are you safe here?”

“I think so. There’s someone...looking after me.”

He stares at me, waiting for more. He looks at me through his stringy dreadlocks, one eyebrow raised.

“All right. Here goes.” I clear my throat. “I have a spirit guide. Sort of a guardian.”

“Spirit.” His voice is a flat monotone. “As in ghost?” He asks skeptically.

“Look, I know it sounds crazy.”

Ink SJ Davis

Layne narrows his eyes and moves me to his lap. He leans his forehead on mine; we are eye to eye. “Are you messing with me?”

“No. I wouldn’t do that.”

Layne looks up at the sky as if the answers will rain down on him. “Like floating-through-walls spirit?”

“No. Solid and very human looking.”

“Are you sure? I mean, how do you know?”

“Forget it, Layne. Maybe I’m crazy. I’m telling you what I know to be true. Are you happy now?” I stand up and look to an open clearing.

“Don’t do that.” He stands up, his voice tinged with anger. “Don’t talk like that to me. I’m here for you. I’m listening to all that you have to say.”

“I don’t know what else to say”

“Just continue with what’s real and with what’s the truth, the truth as you know it.”

Everyone’s truth is different, isn’t it?

I shrug and lean against a tree.

“I’ll help,” he begins again. “What does he or she look like?”

“Well, he’s is a guy. Like you. Well, different...taller, darker, but human looking.”

“Thanks, I don’t need a comparison,” he jokes. “Can anyone else see him? Or just you?”

Ink SJ Davis

“I don’t know. Can we stop talking for a while? I think it’s dangerous for you to know about this. Mateo thinks he is protecting me from something until I’m strong enough to go back to the reservation.”

He can try but he will fail. You will never return.

“No one will ever have your back like I will. No one will hurt you and no one will take you away, as long as you want me here with you.”

I am relieved to have told him even if it’s just the beginning. I hope with all my heart it isn’t the end.

Chapter Eight ~ Every Little Thing He Does

Monday I am supposed to meet Jenny at the Student Union. She texts me that she is delayed during a portfolio review for her Design Theory class, so I find a table in the corner. I see Mateo by the vending machines with his hands shoved in his pockets.

“Doritos are always a good choice.” I say as I walk to him. I notice all the girls are staring at him – which quickly answers my question whether others can see him.

He looks at me with little emotion, an imperceptible snarl lies on his lips. “Isn’t your boyfriend waiting for you somewhere?” He lowers his gaze and strides towards an empty table. I grab my books and follow him, the strap of my bag catches on a chair and I stumble.

The commotion of the noisy metal chairs and me banging into the tables causes him to turn quickly. “Are you always this clumsy?”

His annoyance makes me nervous. “What are you doing here?”

“Maybe your boyfriend can figure it out.”

“Are you spying on me?”

“No more than I need to, believe me. Your boyfriend is putting out a lot of energy right now. Looking for answers to questions that don’t concern him.”

See? You’ve done it now.

“Okay. I get it. You’re pissed I told Layne about you. He’s a good friend. He wants to help me. Am I supposed to lie and hide everything?”

“He isn’t a Native, Sparrow. He has no role to play here. No part. Bringing him into the reservation’s business isn’t going to help.”

Ink SJ Davis

“I don’t even know the reservation’s business!” I am exasperated.

He stares at me; his face and body are defensive. He narrows his eyes. Suddenly, I am completely distracted by the beauty of his bones.

“Why do I even bother,” I sigh. “Just go away. I was perfectly fine before you.”

“No, you weren’t. Not even a little bit.”

You’ll never be fine.

Tears sting the back of my eyes as I turn away from him, walking into the wooded area towards the library. Mateo stays inside and then quickly runs after me. “Your mother lived in a double world. The physical and the spirit world. You do too. But you are in a battle with yourself.”

“I am not interested in two worlds. I have enough trouble in this physical one.”

“You don’t have a choice. Your mother was taken from you before she could share what you need to know. But life isn’t separated from death. It only appears that way from this side, the physical side.” He jumps up into a tree. His athleticism and grace shock me. He reaches down and pulls me up by one arm. He climbs higher into the treetops, motioning for me to follow but I shake my head. I feel high enough.

“Come here. If you want to see what I see, come up here.”

I climb carefully through the rough and jagged branches, cursing him in my mind. He sits in a high branch and I sit between his legs.

“Do you know about the White Buffalo?” He asks.

“The legend? Of course. Every Blackfoot child learns the story.”

“It’s not just a legend. Every story has truth, including the White Buffalo.”

Ink SJ Davis

“From what I remember, whenever there is chaos and disunity, the White Buffalo returns. She is a woman, right?”

“Exactly. She was your mother. Now she is you.”

I feel dizzy and start to tilt to the right. Mateo holds me by my shirt. “I think I am going to pass out.”

“No. You need to listen. You wanted to hear the truth. Your mother returned to the reservation when it was in a state of upheaval. Uranium mines poisoned the land. The water was toxic. She brought Blackfoot ink, the ink filled with the blood and tears of Blackfoot warriors, to Stuart. He used it to mark her and to give her the power and strength of our warriors. Now she is gone and you must fill the void she left.”

You could never be that strong. You will destroy yourself.

“I can’t do that. Plus, the White Buffalo is a myth, a symbolic story.”

“Be patient, Sparrow. All will be fine in the end.” He puts his hand around my waist and helps me to the ground. I crack the seal on a water bottle as we journey, side by side. We walk in time to the Blackfoot music on his iPod; the bass thumps in rhythm with my heart.

Keep thinking it’s a myth.

“We have a problem, Mateo,” I say as we walk in the backdoor to the kitchen.

“Stuart has basically told me that I’m not ready for the ink.”

“He’ll do it. It’s only fair to let you know that every time the needle pushes into you, the pain of your nation will fill you. But it will also strengthen you.”

“What if I’m not strong enough?”

Ink SJ Davis

If?

“Everything in its own time, that’s all.”

“What about choice? Do I have a choice?”

“I’m sorry,” he says with the sorrow of a man that knows agony and horror. The loss of my mother and the memory of the accident creep all around me; my stomach clenched in knots of pain and my face crumbles. Emotions crash around me.

Chapter Nine ~ American Ghost Dance

The memory of the accident hangs on me like a heavy wet cloak. I watch a girl leave The Black Line Tattoo Shop and walk towards the railroad yard. A flowering vine tattoo emerges from under the back of her tank top and crawls like it is living across her neck. She turns back to me.

Go ahead and stare at me. You can't ignore me. I will take you down.

Her snowy hair, bluish lips, and bones jutting from her wrists, shoulders, and elbows accentuate her anemic and ghastly pale skin – translucent enough to see her veins. Frail and cadaverous, she appears as a living dead girl.

I walk closer to her and she seems to emit a guttural, feral hissing noise. I enter Stuart's shop with relief.

Stuart sits by the window, cleaning his machine and looking through the blinds at the living dead girl as she stands on the empty sidewalk.

“Do you know about the White Buffalo?” I blurt out.

He stops cleaning his equipment and pushes up his glasses. He seems to wince.

“Did your mother tell you that it is part of your heritage?”

“No. She died before she could. She told me about the tattoo though.”

“Do you believe it?” he asks.

“I am having a hard time believing anything right now.”

We begin a long silence, almost like a cautious dance, no one wants to reveal more information to the other.

Ink SJ Davis

His expression is troubled and anxious. “I don’t know if it’s time yet. It shouldn’t be done unless it’s right. You are here sooner than I’d expected.”

“When did you expect me?”

“Just not now. If we rush it, all could be wasted.”

“Because I might not recover?”

“Exactly.”

It won’t work. I will stop it. It is all a waste.

As I walk home, I see her again, emerging from the woods alongside the road. Walking like a panther, the blanched icy girl stares at me. Her stride matches mine.

You can’t ignore me.

She looks wilder than before, her untamed hair billows angrily as her icy gray eyes stare. Her eyes change to a deep smoky violet. Still as stone but hyper-vigilant.

Mateo bursts from nowhere and force the keys to his jeep into my palm. “Drive it home,” he commands.

“What about you?” I mumble as I tuck my hair behind my ears and wrap my fingers around his keys.

“Just go. Please do what I say, this one time.” His teeth are clenched as he looks over my shoulder at the girl. I turn towards the girl but he spins me sideways, grabbing my shoulders. I see in his face he has no intention of letting me remain here.

I stumble into the jeep, my emotions crisscross and short circuit. *What is going on?* Mateo is in front of this wild girl; I have no idea how he got to her so quickly. I

Ink SJ Davis

buckle and stare out the window. But now, where they stood, are two wolves in their place – one black, the other a steely grey.

I blink as my hair blows into my face. I start the jeep but don't put it into gear. I'm frozen in place. The leaves on the oaks turn upside down in the wind. The black wolf stiffens and bares its teeth as the grey wolf whips its head to look towards me in the jeep as it crouches down low.

Time feels like a vacuum. A feral snarl rips from one of the wolves and both run into the forest. I put the jeep in gear as Mateo appears from the woods, disheveled and wet. The girl stands again, on the wood's edge. The wolves are gone.

"What are you doing, Mateo?" The female voice asks.

"Leave her alone," Mateo responds.

"She's not ready. She won't make it any further."

"She'll go farther than anyone."

"Not if I can help it."

"You can't stop her. No one can."

Listening to their exchange paralyzes me. Mateo walks over to the driver's side and with a slight cocked motion he gestures for me to climb back over to the passenger side. My hands still grip the keys and he has to open my palm to break my trance. I keep my head down, my eyes won't blink, and I can't swallow.

Mateo revs the engine. "How are you so calm?" My voice sounds high pitched and tight. "Can you tell me what just happened?" My mouth feels like it is filled with cotton, muffling my words, which struggle past the tightness in my throat.

Ink SJ Davis

“I never noticed before,” he answers, “your hair has some blonde in it.” He strokes a strand of hair that is waving about from the open window.

“Only in the sun.” My nervousness transfers to him playing with my hair. My teeth start to chatter and my arms shake from cold and fear.

He tosses me his jacket.

“Thanks.” I slide into it. I bury my face in the sleeves; I love how it smells.

“Are you going to pass out or something?” His face is concerned – he looks over as we stop at a red light. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

I nod. He smiles and rests his hand on top of mine. Then he shakes his head and looks unnerved. “This is more complicated than I’d planned.”

I grab some water from my bag and nibble on some stale crackers. “I think after what I just saw, you need to tell me exactly how you and Stuart and that icy dead girl fit together. And most of all, how all of this really concerns me.”

“Icy dead girl?” He smiles. “What a perfect description. Her name is Winona.”

“And?”

“She’s a dark force. An opposing dark force. She wants to have your power, the power that your mother had...the power that you will have too if all goes well. And I’m here to make sure it all goes well.”

Well for whom?

“So we are back to the White Buffalo?” I ask.

“Yes. Winona wants to change the story. To destroy it once and for all.”

There will be no happily ever after. Not any more.

Ink SJ Davis

I am unable to move from the Jeep until my brain settles. I sit in silence with Mateo in my driveway.

“Promise me something,” he says.

“Okay.”

“Don’t go to The Black Line without me. I want to be there for you.”

“Why?”

“Let’s just leave it at that for now. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay. Tomorrow,” I reply while jumping down from the Jeep.

“Sparrow?” I turn as he leans across the gear stick and my heart jumps.

“Sweet dreams.”

Dream of death, stupid girl.

“Sparrow!” Jenny calls from inside the kitchen when I walk inside. “Where have you been?” She looks out the window over the sink at Mateo driving away. “Who’s that guy?”

“Just a guy, sort of an old friend.”

“Looks like more than just an old friend to me.”

“I don’t know, really. It’s...complicated.”

“Complicated with Layne or with that guy? Listen, I will tell you right now that I’m a big fan of Layne and I think you’re super lucky he likes you so much. But I am your friend first and foremost, so...I’m here for you. If you want to talk.”

“Thanks, I guess I’m confused about everyone. Not everyone is who they seem.”

And you most of all.

Ink SJ Davis

Chapter Ten ~ Endless, Nameless

The next morning is dark and foggy, absolutely dismal. I throw on my jeans and flip-flops, regardless of the weather channel's call for rain. I run down the stairs into the kitchen and pour a bowl of Cheerios. I chase them down with an energy drink.

I run outside and the mist and dew cling to my neck and feet. Such a thick fog is in the air that I don't see the other car in the driveway. A beaten-up gold Volkswagen Jetta. It's Layne.

"Do you want a ride to school?" Layne smiles as he gets out of the car. "And, um, surprise!" He seems uncertain of my response.

"When did you get here? Are you here for good?" I run over wishing I had gotten up earlier to look more presentable.

"About an hour ago. Drove straight from Wilmington." He moves closer and closer to me, walking pensively until our feet touch.

"Careful, I'm practically barefoot."

"Sweet toes," he continues. "I love blue toenails."

I feel a pinch of unwarranted jealousy. "I guess you've admired a lot of blue toes."

"Sparrow...I love your blue toes. Just yours."

I crawl into his car, stepping over banana peels, empty coffee cups and water bottles. The floor is strewn with papers filled with lyrics and guitar picks.

The girl's voice follows me here. *What are you doing in here, with this one? You make it so easy for me.*"

Chapter Eleven ~ The Stain

Jenny is walking towards the 9:30 Club carrying her camera bag. Her Nikon is ready and poised to take pictures of the infamous bouncer with all the tattoos.

“Jenny,” Layne yells out the window. “Hold up.”

We park as Jenny waits for us. “I have a class tomorrow, an early one.” I protest slightly but Layne’s smile makes me forget about it.

“I’ll make sure you get there. Let’s just see who’s playing tonight.” He winks and holds my hand.

When we cross the street, everything looks askew. The street looks overly sharp and clear, then its edges fade and blur. The people outside look dark and stiff, as if they are from an old photograph.

We walk up to the window where a muscular man, with enormous earlobes and a tattoo that covers the lower part of his face, stands guard. Showing our identification, we get our hands stamped and are nodded inside and up the stairs. A wall of smells – spilled beer, cleaning fluids, vomit, and rodent urine - hits us in the face.

The music, the movement of the crowd, and the dark and erratic lights flashing, pulls us to the center of the floor. Jenny takes my hand and we dance like marionettes into the sea of people.

I see you. I can find you anywhere. I hear her again. I look everywhere for the disembodied voice that comes from nowhere.

“Do you see a strange girl anywhere?” I yell to Jenny.

“Everyone’s strange here,” she laughs.

Ink SJ Davis

“Wait. Up there. At the upstairs bar by the rail.” I see her, looking down. The icy dead girl. “Don’t look! Don’t be obvious.”

“I don’t see anyone unusual. Don’t be so paranoid. I’m getting a drink. Do you want something?”

Then it happens in a flash.

“NO!” Mateo shouts. *When did he get here?* He leaps towards me from the tables along the walls. The crowd scatters, drinks drop, glass breaks. Winona moves faster than Mateo, faster than humanly possible. It sounds like thunder. I slip or I’m pushed on the floor and stinging pain shoots through my arm. Confused and shocked, my ears sting and my mouth is sour. I look down at the warm redness of my own blood pouring down my arm. I see punctures in my forearm and then I look into the cold grey eyes of Winona.

Behind her, Mateo reached down and pulls her up by the back of her hair. She doesn’t blink.

“So Mateo is here for you again.” Her tiny nostrils flare like a dragon. “He is the good boyfriend after all.” She turns to snarl at him.

But you are holding out for the boy with the yellow vine hair, aren’t you?

Bouncers appear from every corner of the club and gather around me, helping me up.

I just saved you the trouble of cutting yourself tonight.

Jenny bends over me, helping me up. “Are you okay? What the hell happened?”

“We have to get that cleaned up right away,” interrupts Mateo. Layne and Max walk towards me from the bar area. Layne looks at Mateo and then at me. Mateo’s arm is wrapped around me. Layne looks confused as if he doesn’t recognize me.

Ink SJ Davis

A server runs towards me with the scratchy brown paper towels from the bathroom. Completely nonabsorbent, the paper merely smears the blood all over my arm.

“What happened?” Layne asks softly, stepping between Mateo and me.

“We were dancing and some crazy girl pushed me and somehow I got cut.”

“Who would randomly cut you?” He looks at Mateo, who wasn’t moving from his position of standing guard. “Who is this?” He asks me.

“You’ll figure it out eventually.” Mateo turns away, brushing off Layne’s concern. “Sparrow needs to leave with me now so we can take care of that cut.”

When Layne walks into my room the next morning I am in different clothes. I’m not sure how the clothes got on me but I guess it doesn’t matter. At least I am covered. My arm feels tight from dried blood and tender under the ten little band-aids Mateo must have scrounged up.

“I brought you some breakfast. And a coke.” He sits quietly but his legs fidget. He taps rhythms with his fingers along his knees.

Don’t tell him anything more or I will destroy him too.

“Thanks, Layne.”

“So will you tell me what went down last night? I couldn’t sleep. I worry about you constantly and I can’t figure any of this out.”

“Everything around me is getting stranger, Layne. I don’t get it either.”

“Is that guy, the one who had his arm around you, the spirit you were telling me about?”

I don’t want to lie to him.

Ink SJ Davis

Lie. You'd better lie.

“Yes. He is.”

You've done it now.

I gesture for him to sit next to me on the bed. Our eyes lock, staring, our breath in identical rhythm. I start to shake with fever, so I climb on top of him.

“Sparrow,” Layne whispers urgently as he wiggles out from underneath me. His shirt is damp where I'd been laying. I feel like I am floating under indigo waves.

“Sparrow! Wake up! Can you hear me?”

You can't move, can you? See? I am winning.

I want to say yes but my lips are cold and numb. I nod but everything feels slow, like I am drowning in heavy wet blankets. My arm burns as the fire runs up to my shoulder; finally I am able to sit up.

“Layne,” I roll towards him, my voice clenched.

“I'm going to get you to a doctor.” Layne grabs his phone and looks around the room for anything we should take with us. “But you're going to be fine.”

“My arm is killing me!” I arch my back in pain. Every muscle in my face and neck is taut.

“You are going to be okay. Where are your shoes?”

“No! I'm on fire!”

Layne looks down at my arm, red and punctured. “Those are deep cuts.”

I hear someone running up the stairs, too heavy and too fast to be Aunt Shelby.

He's too late, you know. He's too late.

“Let me see your arm.” Mateo fills the doorway to my room.

Ink SJ Davis

My arm is unmoving and heavy, hot to the touch. Mateo grabs my wrist and turns my arm over. His face is as agonized as I feel.

“The fact that she is bleeding so heavily is a good thing. Not clotting is a good thing.”

“Why? What do you mean? Just get out of here, would you? You’re to blame for all of this.” Layne’s mouth sets firm, his teeth bite his lower lip, as he shoves his hands in his pockets.

“Her body is getting rid of the toxin. Fighting it.”

She’ll lose. I’ll make certain of it.

“What toxin? What the hell are you talking about?” Layne yells, grabbing Mateo’s collar and pushing him into my closet door.

His hair falls over his eyebrows as he looks over to me. “I got to Sparrow before Winona was able to cut too deeply. Otherwise Sparrow would be dead.”

There will be other chances. I will release everything I have into her.

The image of Winona makes my pain flare higher. I writhe, nauseous and dizzy.

“Mateo!” I scream and grab for his face. I pull it to mine, desperate to find relief. “Help me!”

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t think she would attack so soon.” His eyes are squeezed shut and he is unable to look at me as sweat pours down my face and body. “She must be getting desperate.”

“No one saw another girl,” said Layne. “What is going on?”

I am right in front of you, fool.

“Should we call an ambulance? The cops?” Layne asks.

Ink SJ Davis

“There is nothing they can do.”

You're right. There is nothing they can do. This isn't their realm. I am not in their world. And neither is your precious Sparrow.

“Then do something,” commands Layne. “Or I am taking her with me.”

“I can try to get out the venom.”

“Why? Why did she do this?” I beg for an answer.

“She doesn't want you to get the tattoo. She is afraid of you getting the ink.”

I am not afraid of anything. But I will see you dead before you get one drop of that ink.

“Stop this fire!” I plead. “Do anything.”

I watch Mateo's face, first drawn tight with remorse, then anger, and finally determination. His eyes narrow and jaw tightens. He looks upwards and I scream again, blinded by flaming arcs of hot pain.

He leans over into me. His smooth fingers run across my arm, cooling it by his touch. He turns my arm up to his lips, quickly flashes a small knife and cuts around the bite marks. Smoke flashes in the air as my vision tunnels down into a small dot of light. His lips lock onto my arm, his mouth pulls out the blood and venom and I feel release.

“Layne...” my lips move with no sound.

“I'm right here, Sparrow. Right here. Don't try to talk.”

“Don't leave me.” My voice returns. “Please don't leave me.”

“Don't worry.”

“Mateo,” I say. “Where's Mateo?”

Ink SJ Davis

“He’s here too,” says Layne as his unwavering eyes meet Mateo’s. Neither of them looks away from the other. A low growl sounds throughout my room.

Which one do you want?

Chapter Twelve ~ The Choosing

Movement. I know I see movement in the trees outside my window. Shimmery and dark shadows surround me and I hear the sound of wind sucking outside the windowpane and then it stops. Total stillness.

“Free me. I want to be free of this, Mateo,” I hiss. “I want you to help me end it.”

It will only end with your death.

“That’s why I’m here. But it’s for you to do. I am just here to guide you and to protect you on your way back to the reservation.”

“I don’t know if I want to return, Mateo. There is nothing for me there.”

There is nothing for you there, you are right.

“She has a choice,” says Layne. “She will always have a choice.”

No choice. I won’t let her choose.

“Her ties to the reservation can’t be severed. She was born into the Blackfoot Nation. There are terms and responsibilities as well as honor.”

“The reservation is my home. I was born there and my mother died on its roads. End of story. I am here now.”

“You are wrong,” says Mateo. “It’s the beginning of the story.”

Layne’s knuckles turn white with rage and I stroke his hand.

“And you,” says Mateo, starting to circle the periphery of my room and almost growling, “may distract her and enjoy her. But she will never be yours.”

She will never be yours either, Mateo.

“I don’t buy anything you say. I’m only listening to Sparrow.”

Ink SJ Davis

“There is nothing here for you to buy. Your blood, your past, your future is nothing as far as the Blackfoot are concerned.”

Layne pulls at his lip ring gently, rolling it around his mouth. “I wouldn’t bet on my future, if I were you.”

Chapter Thirteen ~ The Mark

I run my fingers over the page of art. My stomach is clenched. I gaze at Layne and force myself to look back at the page. The glossy plastic sheet covering the art reflects my face. I run my fingers over it and imagine what it would feel like to carry this design on my body. Somehow painful and beautiful, all at once.

It won't work. It's too soon.

My pulse beats fast under my skin. I straighten my back as Mateo leans over my shoulder. "We have to try it now."

Try it and die.

"You shouldn't rush her. Especially if it's as dangerous as you claim," says Layne.

"I don't *want* to rush her. But it seems to be the only way that she'll be safe. Winona will be powerless against Sparrow once she has the ink."

"It's a chance I have to take," I say with brave defiance. "And getting the ink keeps a part of my mother alive in me."

But it will destroy all of you. I will make sure of it.

A book falls from the shelf and Layne turns to grab it right as I do. I turn and stand there. Staring at his shirt, I notice a button is missing. He kisses me. I stretch up on my toes, trying to get as close as I can as he slides his hand around my waist. It's like I am suffocating and he is my air.

He lifts me onto the table and I wrap my hands in his hair, pulling him closer. It is the most perfect kiss and it's from Layne.

Ink SJ Davis

“Definitely worth the wait,” he smiles. My legs are on either side of him with my ankles crossed behind him, locking him to me.

“I’m scared. Don’t leave me. I know you have dozens of girls skulking around when you’re on tour, Layne. But I need you here.”

“Hey,” he rests his hands on my thighs. “There’s no one else. Just you. No one else ever since I met you.”

Stuart and Mateo say nothing. Mateo turns away to look outside, but I can tell he is shaking his head in disapproval.

“Let’s do it,” says Stuart. “It will take a couple of sessions. And that’s good, we’ll be able to see how she reacts.” Mateo nods, picking up some bottles of ink. “Be careful. That’s all that’s left of the ink.”

A wicked and dark laugh rolls through the room.

“What’s that?” asked Layne.

“Winona is looking for a way in,” says Mateo. “She wants to destroy the ink, but she can’t get close to it. It’s stronger than she will ever be.”

The room turns cold and I shiver. I pass the design to Stuart.

“Are you sure this is the design you want? You must be able to live with it.”

She’ll never be able to live with it. She’ll die with it.

“Yep, I’m sure.” I choose the design from my dream: the owl and floating feather alongside the four circles, intertwined in a center knot. I add a bridge of sparrows across the top.

Stuart starts getting things ready silently. He opens a needle package and pulls out the thin metal.

Ink SJ Davis

My needle, for me and for others. My ink for my skin. I breathe deeply, still watching Stuart set up.

I look at the tattoo machine – its coils and angles. I shiver. Something primal and earthy echoed through me, I will be different after this, and that is exactly what I need.

“Take off your top,” says Stuart. Layne smiles but looks at the floor while Mateo still looks out window. “Keep your bra on.” He wipes my back with cold liquid and picks up the stencil of her tattoo. “Turn around.”

Stuarts steadies me with his hand on my hip. Layne stares at me as I stand there. He looks hungry. Stuart sprays a cool liquid at the top of my spine between my shoulders and across my back. “Tie your hair up, please.” He presses the stencil on my back and then peels it away. “Go see if it’s right.”

Layne follows me to the bathroom as I look at the markings on my back. He pushes me against the mirror and tangles his hands in my hair.

“Don’t touch my back,” I warn.

“I can’t make any promises.”

There is a knock at the door as it opens. Mateo stands in the doorway, his eyes are dark. “It’s time.”

We leave the bathroom and head back towards Stuart. My nerves feel hyper aware and exposed.

I lay face down, but slightly tilted upwards on a sort of massage chair. Stuart smears ointment on my skin over the stencil. “You good?”

“I’m good,” I say as I brace myself, wondering about the pain. Several ink caps sit next to Stuart, filled with what I need.

Ink SJ Davis

It won't work. It won't take. It's too soon. I know it.

“Ready?”

I nod. Layne sits next to my head, stroking my hair. I feel closer to him than ever. The first touch of the needle startles me. My skin feels irritated but not pained. The tattoo machine is over my back and I am afraid to breathe or move. Stuart starts the outline the tattoo.

“She’s doing fine. She’ll be okay,” says Layne.

“We haven’t used the Blackfoot ink yet,” says Mateo. “This could be a long haul.”

Don't forget dangerous.

I close my eyes, listening to the machine as it hums and pauses. Lifting and touching. The vibration sends the tattoo deep through my skin, marking me.

“Here we go,” says Stuart as he uncaps an amber bottle. The outside of the bottle is marked with a label, handwritten in Blackfoot. As the bottle opens, heat fills the room. Smoke snakes from its tiny opening and the sounds of men singing or chanting fill my ears.

He pours this ink into another cap and changes his gloves.

“I thought it would hurt more.”

“It will. It does.” He lowers the tattoo machine again. The burn was so intense I couldn’t speak. The hum of the machine was no longer comforting. The hum changed to the jagged but rhythmic sound of tribal drums. When I tried to moan and speak, the echoing sounds of horses running and women with children crying emanated from me.

“Do you hear that?” I ask Layne.

Ink SJ Davis

“Hear what?” He answers.

“Yes, I hear it,” says Mateo. “It’s from the blood and tears of our people being removed and killed.”

You won’t make it through this. The pain of your people will kill you. Weak little girl.

“Shut up, Winona,” says Mateo.

“You hear her too? All this time, it’s not just me?”

“It’s never just you. You aren’t alone.”

“How’re you doing?” Stuart asks.

I feel loose, like my body is made of Jell-O. “Keep going,” I tell Stuart. “I can keep going.”

“Mmm...I don’t know. Not tonight.”

“No, let’s finish it.”

Yes. Push for it. You won’t make it through.

“I think we should do this in two sessions. Let’s not push our luck.” Stuart is quiet as he wipes my skin. Layne takes the cotton cloth from him and continues gently wiping the beginnings of my tattoo.

“I think she can do it,” says Mateo. “Winona is getting more agitated. The sooner Sparrow completes the tattoo, the safer she will be.”

I’m not sure anymore. Time feels like it is off, speeding up and slowing down. Sounds aren’t normal. I hear chants, cries, voices, and drums in my head – all bending to rhythms that aren’t predictable. I pull myself up and unsteadiness takes over.

“I feel weird.”

Ink SJ Davis

“There’s something wrong,” says Layne, looking at Stuart. “Her eyes look strange.”

“It’s an endorphin rush, that’s all. It’s normal,” says Stuart as he snaps off his gloves and pulls the machine back and away from me.

Layne whips his head around, his dreadlocks surrounds him like a halo as the sun shines through them. He knows Stuart is lying, but he says nothing. I can tell. The hum remains in my veins and I feel strangely euphoric.

Chapter Fourteen ~ So Fast, So Numb

I go home alone. I want to be free of all this – to have a normal life. The stairs to my room feel like they are tilting and bending, as if they are an amusement ride. The carpet moves under my feet. I run to the bathroom and splash cold water on my face. The mirror twists and my reflection contorts back at me.

I am not sure who you think I am. But that girl isn't here. She doesn't even exist. Look at me closely. If you dare.

It feels like fangs are sinking into my skin and a humming fear rings in my ears. I feel a strange grasping clutch of fingers wrap bruisingly tight around my wrists. My face feels flame red and my back feels tight and raw.

“Let go of me,” I say to whatever is holding my arms. My voice isn't strong, but I hear it softly echo in the closed room. I blink and try to focus.

Eyes flash behind me.

It's me.

“Winona,” I gasp. She stands in front of me, her profile glowing in the moonlight shooting through my window. She rubs her arms and neck with her bony hands; her fingers reach up and stroke her disheveled hair. “What do you want?”

What I've always wanted. You. You are in my place.

“What are you talking about?” I look at the inside of her arms and see streaks of scars and fresh cuts. “Do you cut yourself?” I step back, tripping over the carpet's edge, knocking over my toothbrush and body lotion. I try to balance myself on the edge of the sink, holding on to the cool granite.

Ink SJ Davis

If you are gone, I will be unbound and free. No longer a shadow.

“You have no authority over her,” Mateo’s voice shouts from the other side of the door. “Sparrow, look at her. Look at her face!”

“Why Mateo? What am I looking for?” I plead, biting my lip and flinching under Winona’s hot gaze. “Come in, help me!”

Blind girl.

“I can’t. You have to do this yourself. Use your strength.”

I spin around and am pushed to my knees. Winona pulls a razor from her mouth and hands it to me. I accept it. She smiles.

“Sparrow! Don’t do anything!” Mateo yells from the other side. “Look at her, please.”

I pull my head up, the razor still sitting in my hand. The edges of Winona’s form seem to fade and blur.

You think you’ll wear the perfect art across your back. But it will never be right. It’s mine. I’ll have it before you.

“Listen to your instincts. Don’t listen to her,” Mateo whispers through the door. I reach for the doorknob but it burns my skin. “You’re stronger, you have more power and she can’t touch you. Find it. It’s inside you.”

I struggle to stand, while my eyes are closed. I feel like I am waiting for the world to end.

Look at me now, Sparrow. You will give up because you are weak.

“Why?”

You will get your answer. I am no stranger.

Ink SJ Davis

I open my eyes. I hear a cacophony of loud voices and wind.

“Look at her,” says Mateo again.

I stare into her eyes; a gentle buzz hums in my ear. Familiarity. I reach out, squinting through the darkness. I gasp. Her face is my face. I am Winona.

If you are gone then I take your place. Get out of my way.

Chapter Fifteen ~ Breaking The Girl

The door kicks open and its Mateo. Layne is next to him. They both stand in my doorway, two young men whom I have come to care for, one dark and one pale. They fill its space, side by side. Layne pulls back his blonde dreadlocks and twists them into a makeshift ponytail. He rubs the scruff on his chin and he looks like he hasn't slept in days. Tired black circles hang under his eyes and his high cheekbones look gaunt.

So you have a cavalry?

I turn to her again. Her eyes match mine – the almond shape, the caramel color; the wide bridge of her nose is mine, and even her lips. Her nose has the same tiny bump and she has the same dimple on her cheek, just one, not two. Even the tiny freckles on our cheeks match. “What is going on?”

You never knew, but it's obvious. It's me or it's you. We are the same... but I won't keep fighting you for the power. I will take it.

“I'm not fighting for anything. I just want to be...” I struggle to answer between tightened breaths, “normal.”

Mateo stands behind me, patting my back, making small soothing circles between my shoulders. “It's okay. You will get through this. Just breathe.”

“It's not okay, Mateo,” my voice sounds pinched. “I don't understand! Am I her?” Nausea rises and I close my eyes.

“Stay calm. She is a part of you. She is a reflection of your fear, your guilt, and your misplaced anger. Use your mind and let it all go. Let her go.” Layne moves closer.

“She will disappear when you find your center.” His voice comforts me in a way it

Ink SJ Davis

always has. “Find peace, Sparrow. It’s inside you. Forgive yourself for living after the accident. Let go of the guilt of your mother’s death. Live. You have the power to free yourself.”

“I don’t have that kind of power.”

“You do. Don’t let the worst parts of you win.” Mateo pulls me into the hallway while Layne remains leaning in the bathroom doorway. Winona stares at me through the bluish light coming in the window. She smiles; her teeth are not like mine at all, that is the only difference between the two of us. Hers are hungry and feral looking.

“I don’t know...” I watch Winona grow taller and stretch out, her limbs elongating and twisting. She almost becomes transparent.

“She has always been a part of you. She is the opposing side of you. Be strong; feel your own grace and her power will shift. She’ll be gone.”

“Will she always be a threat to me?”

“She is always a possibility to you,” answered Mateo. “We all have a dark and unhealthy version of ourselves lurking in the shadows. You are able to look yours in the face.”

Layne steps in front of me and leans down onto my shoulder. The longer strands of his hair fall like a web over me. “I’m here with you. You aren’t alone. You are better than her. She finds you in weakness. She gains power when you cut yourself. End it and end her. Then move on. Move on with me.”

I look down into my hand. The razor Winona handed me sits in my palm.

You can’t give that up. You need it. You have too much pain to be rid of it. Or me.

I throw it at her violently.

Ink SJ Davis

“No, I don’t.” I feel stronger for giving her back this pain and for not hurting myself.

“Your mother would want you to let go,” says Layne.

His hands are on my skin, under the edge of my shirt. I can’t find any words.

Layne smiles at me.

“Do I have a choice?” My voice wavers and I see a glint of fear in Layne’s eyes. I look at Mateo, his eyes are confident.

“Do it,” he says. Mateo bends and whispers into my ear. “Do it. You can.”

The sound of a tornado blows in my ears. I gasp. I close my eyes. I see my mother smiling, she waves and nods at me. I see myself as a toddler, learning to walk. My mother is clapping as I walk closer to her. Her eyes dart to a shadow behind me as she pulls an arrow from her pocket. She stabs the shadow. It is gone. Nothing remains. She hands me the arrow. I do the same. I stab at Winona but she is a mere shadow. The more I fight her, the less of her remains.

My mother walks backwards, becoming smaller in the distance. She waves and shouts to me to go back so I do. I feel like I walk through a pane of shattering glass. I turn back and she is gone. The skin on my back no longer burns.

Chapter Sixteen ~ Over The Bridge

I shift from foot to foot, looking at Layne and Mateo. “I’m ready to finish my tattoo.”

Mateo starts to walk away as Layne pushes himself from the wall. I see the shadowy bruises on my arms as he gathers both of my hands in his. He seems so breakable. I pull away gently to trace my fingertips over his shoulders as he moves closer. Mateo tosses his arm around my shoulder, interrupting my movements, and pulls and directs me down the sidewalk. “Let’s go,” he says.

“We’ll both go,” Layne says. “After she gets inked, she’ll figure out what she wants to do from there.”

We walk down to The Black Line in the night and watch a group of skaters across the street doing tail-slides on the curb. Peace washes over me. I am no longer chased by the past. There is nothing for me but the future.

I let go of thought and words while a small white feather blows ahead of us. In the wind, I hear my mother. *All will be good my brave, Sparrow. All will be good.*