

CHAPTER 1



TAKE THIS KISS UPON THE BROW

The tree bore few branches and even fewer leaves. Standing in the middle of cracked gray concrete, under a sky greened by smog, its sooty trunk seemed to jut upside-down in space. The warped boards and jagged brown tarp among its branches looked like nothing more than a garbage heap to anyone who passed by the vacant lot.

To twelve-year-old Tipani Walker, this was home.

A tiny shadow below the city lights, she ducked silently under the broken fence. The sun was going down. In most homes, parents would be calling their kids for dinner. Tipani's mother, sitting in the dark house a few blocks away, wouldn't call her to eat tonight. She wouldn't even notice Tipani was gone.

Reaching her tree, Tipani looked around carefully. The shade between sunset-glow was growing, leaking onto the ground like spilled ink. None of it moved like people. Tipani gave a short nod to herself, but her brown eyes didn't look away as she jumped up, grabbing a rope the same dusky color as the trunk it hung beside. It was only when she had it in her hand that she adjusted her thick black glasses, focusing her attention fully on the braid.

It was one of her favorites; a knot she had created herself. Nobody but her could follow the twists, turns, loops and ties she had fashioned into it. She called it the Not Knot, and it was her sentinel, guarding the only place she felt truly safe in the whole world.

She made quick work of it, her nimble fingers flick-flying in the fading daylight. Slipping away the last loop, she stretched up to unhook the slack from a nail above her head.

FVVVVVP!

The ladder that dropped down was fashioned of the same rope, knotted every foot to make climbing easy. Unlike the Not Knot, these were average: easy to tie and easier to loosen. But they were tight enough to hold her as she climbed up the trunk and into the rickety treehouse.

Inside, the brown tarp made up most of the walls, accentuated here and there with duct tape and newspaper comics to cover rips and tears. The floor was a mishmash of odd-sized boards, old bits of linoleum taken from the Zip Mart dumpster around the corner, and the branches themselves, which crisscrossed through the area like fat, muddy laserbeams. There were no windows where Tipani's light could be seen from the street, but she had ripped a small hole in the top of the tarp to let smoke escape. At first she'd used a flashlight to keep the shadows at bay, but finding batteries was a lot harder than learning how to make fire using her mother's lighters, and fuel was a simple matter of playing pick-up-sticks in the dumpster... even if what she burned wasn't usually sticks at all.

Once she was through the trapdoor, she leaned down and pulled the ladder up hand-over-hand, the rope slack following. She re-tied the Not Knot but kept it with her, closing the trapdoor over the hole she'd cut in it for the rope to pass through.

Then she took a deep breath, and smiled.

Finally. Peace.

She made her small fire in the metal burn bucket – the fuel today was a pile of old phonebooks she had been lucky to find – and turned to her book corner. Stacked almost as high as the ceiling, the stories she'd already read a dozen times were like old friends. She grabbed her very favorite, a dog-eared paperback titled *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*, and unrolled her sleeping bag to settle in. It wasn't until she had passed chapter four and her stomach growled that she remembered the peanut butter sandwich she'd packed for dinner.



The black kite danced starkly against the cloudless summer sky. In the shape of a crow, it was dark and strong like the identical birds Mom and Dad had tattooed on their shoulders. Someday Tipani would have one of her own, but for now she was still too young.

"Why do you like crows so much?" she asked, playing with her matching necklace while she watched the kite soar through the air.

Dad pulled her mother close. "Because they brought your mom to me," he said. Then he leaned down and kissed Tipani on the forehead. "And then she gave me you."

Tipani giggled. "Dadd-eeee!"

"Stop teasing her," Mom said with a laugh. "You know she wants to hear the whole story."

Dad laughed too as he handed Tipani the kite string. "I have answered that question a dozen times, little Tippy."

"Answer it just ONCE MORE?" Tipani said. "Pleeeeeease?"

The wind picked up just then, making the kite dip and swerve. It tugged hard at Tipani, but the grip-knots didn't budge in her small but strong hands.

"Alright, alright," Dad said. "You know I can't resist those big-old pouty eyes of yours. Wayyyy back when I was very young..."

"Like me?" Tipani asked.

Dad put a gentle hand on her head. "Hmm. No, I think a bit bigger."

"Big enough to fall in love," Mom said.

"With a beautiful young woman," Dad agreed. "Who was also a bit bigger than you, little Tippy."

"JUST a tad," Mom said, laughing.

"She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen," Dad continued. "And I saw her often –"

"At work in the warehouse!" Tipani said.

"Am I telling the story, or you?" Dad said sternly, but his eyes danced merrily as he said it.

"Yes, in the warehouse. We both worked on the line, packing boxes to ship all over the world, but I never talked to her because I was too afraid."

"Mommy's not scary," Tipani said with a giggle.

"Not now," Dad said, "but back then, she was the scariest thing I could think of."

"RAWR!" Mom said. "SOOO scary!"

Tipani laughed as the wind picked up again, tugging at the kite string even harder. "But the crows helped you talk to her!"

Dad nodded. "They would play around in the yard where we had our lunches on warm days. I fed them French fries –"

"Which he always ate," Mom said. "So unhealthy!"

"HEY!" Dad said, "I like French fries!"

"Me too!" Tipani said, yanking back at the string against the wind.

"Besides," Dad said, "French fries aren't much better than potato chips."

"Baked potato chips," Mom corrected. "They're healthier. And they taste better too."

"The crows didn't think so," Dad said, giving Tipani a wink. "They never ate even one of your mom's nasty chips."

"Crows got no taste," Mom muttered.

"What did they do with them?" Tipani asked, though she knew the answer as well as she knew the story. Her question was part of the story now, too.

"They gave them to me," Dad answered. "Threw them down in front of my feet like they were trying to buy my fries with them."

"And one day, I got tired of it," Mom said. "Walked right over to him to give him a piece of my mind."

"Like it was my fault!" Dad laughed. "But I'd never been so scared in all my life when this beautiful woman I'd been dreaming about for ages came barreling up to me with a face like a storm."

Mom laughed. "'Those are their chips', I said to him. 'I gave them to the crows, not you.'"

"And what did you say, Daddy?" Tipani asked.

Dad grinned at Mom. "'Are you trying to poison the poor things?'"

Tipani laughed, like she did every time.

"I was so mad!" Mom said, but she was laughing too. "I couldn't even reply to that!"

"And I was mortified," Dad said. "I was sure I'd ruined any chance I'd ever have with her because of my big, stupid mouth. But the next day, your mom threw an unopened bag of chips at me without a word."

Mom shrugged. "You did have a big, stupid mouth, but you were cute anyway."

"That was the beginning of a silly little food war," Dad said. "That ended in peace and love. And you, Tippy. You are our little Crow baby, and we love you more than the moon and stars."

Tipani smiled up at the kite as a low rumble of thunder sounded in the distance. Worried, she looked back at Mom and Dad.

"I wanna go ho – "

She stopped, realizing she was talking to the air.

They were gone.

"Mom? Dad?" she called into the ever-growing gale.

Tug – tug – tu – RIP!

The whip-wind wrenched the kite from her hand, leaving a deep line of red in her palm.

"Ow! Nooo! My CROW!" Tipani called after it, but it was gone, flying wildly into the darkening clouds above.

Thunder rumbled again. Closer this time.

"Mom?" Tipani whispered at the storm. "Dad?"

She sank to her knees as a steaming rain began to fall. Each droplet stung her skin like fire, leaving pockmarks all over her neck, back, and arms just like the pockmarks all over Mom's face.

But not when the kite flew in the summer sky.

Now.

Now?

"Mommy?" Tipani whimpered.

The rain kept falling, stinging, hurting. Thunder surrounded her now, shaking the grass, shaking her knees.

Shaking her bones.

A hazy smoke rose from the grass. It smelled like medicine.

No... like poison.



Tipani's eyes flew open. For a moment she lay in the dark, relieved that it had just been a dream. One she'd had many times before, but still just a dream.

Not real. It wasn't real.

She looked at the fire, now burned down to white cinders flecked in red bits of glitterglow, and tried to calm her breathing.

Just a dream. Just a dream. Just –

Click-clink.

A quick gasp, then her breathing stopped entirely as deep murmurs wafted up through her branches from the ground below, thick and heavy as the smoke that followed.

Smoke that smelled like medicine.

Clink-click.

The clinking of spoons again, somewhere in the darkness. They held the medicine.
Not like Mom's cabinet cough syrup. Not like the doctor's. This was inkier. Heavier.

Dirtier.

Like poison.

Like *him*.

He was the reason Tipani lived in the tree now.

He was the reason her mom never talked to her anymore.

He was the storm, and the wind. The shaking thunder and the burning rain.

Tipani called him Spoon Man, after the scorched, bent goo-spoons he left behind when he came to see her mom. Tipani had never seen him, though. She always left the house the moment she heard his stinky car outside.

Stinky, like medicine. Like the smoke in her dream grass.

Only this time it was coming from below her branches, wafting through the dark of the city.

Horribly, horribly real.

CHAPTER 2



AND, IN PARTING FROM YOU NOW

Tipani didn't dare move, lying on her pallet of newspapers and blankets long after the smell went away and the murmuring voices with it.

Finally, when the sun had been up long enough to warm her frozen body, she sat up and shook herself, loosening her tense muscles. It was Wednesday. She was late for school. But after the nightmare – after the smell – she had to make an important stop first.

The hospital was only a few blocks from her treehouse, but it felt like miles as she ran across the sun-scorched sidewalk, her backpack bouncing hard against her shoulders. By the time she entered the big glass doors she could hardly breathe.

"Tipani! Whatever is the matter?" The nurse who sat at the counter looked at her with concern as she doubled over, catching her breath. "Shouldn't you be in school?"

Tipani held up a hand to show she wasn't ready to talk yet. When her breath finally slowed, she stood up.

"Is he... okay?"

The nurse – her name was Elvira – slowly smiled. "Yes, honey. He's just as fine as he has been for the last two years."

Relief flooded Tipani's whole body like a shower of cool, clear water in the middle of summer. "Can I see him?"

Nurse Elvira scrunched up her face in suspicion. "Isn't it a school day?"

Tipani nodded. "I'm on my way, but I had to see –"

"It's nine-thirty. When does school start these days?"

"Eight-thirty," Tipani answered sheepishly. "But I just need to see him for a few minutes. *Please.*"

Elvira gazed at Tipani for a long time, and Tipani thought for a moment there was more worry in her eyes than being late for school merited. Finally, the nurse nodded.

"But if you're in there too long, I'm gonna come and shoo you to school, understand?"

Tipani would have answered that if she wasn't already running to his room.

The nurse was right, of course. He was the same.

Tipani tiptoed over to his bed, as if she could wake him with mere footsteps. They had tried many times to pull him out of the coma he'd slipped into overnight almost two years before, but they had no idea why he was comatose in the first place. Everyone said he was at the peak of health. Everyone said he was just fine.

Only he wasn't fine. He wouldn't wake up. No matter what they did.

Tipani lifted his big hand into both of hers. She squeezed. His fingers didn't move.

"Daddy?" she whispered. "Daddy, are you okay in there?"

She watched his strong, angular face for any sign that he heard her. His eyes - brown like hers and always so full of smiles - stayed closed. His long, dark hair sprawled out on the pillow like the halo of a crow god.

"You look a lot like him."

Tipani turned to see Nurse Elvira in the doorway.

"Do you feel better now?"

"Yes." Tipani pulled the blanket up higher on his chest; it was cold in the hospital room. "I'll go to school now. Can I visit after?"

Elvira bit her lip. "Of course, honey. Always."



"And what is your excuse this time, young lady?"

Tipani fidgeted with the string of her gray hoodie as the million-year-old school secretary stared her down with tiny, squinty eyes.

Tipani hated those eyes.

"I slept in," she said honestly.

The secretary, whose name was Mrs. Roachie (of course all the kids called her The Roach behind her back), snorted.

"Go to bed earlier," she muttered into a drawer. Her fingers made the same sound as her namesake as they scraped dryly against the papers inside.

"Yes, ma'am," Tipani said, suppressing a shudder at the sound. "I'll try."

Finally, Roachie pulled a yellow pad of paper out of the drawer, scribbled on it with a nubby pencil, and handed it to Tipani.

"You'll *succeed.*" The old woman waved a hand dismissively, her interest already back to the game of solitaire on her computer screen. "Get going. It's almost lunch already."

Tipani had never gotten used to walking into the classroom late, despite having made a habit of it. She stopped outside the fake-wood door, focusing on her teacher's current obsession: football. Every student had cut an oblong shape out of brown construction paper, glued black paper "laces" over it, and written their name and what talents they felt they brought to their "classroom team". The footballs now covered a big piece of green paper that, in turn, covered the door itself. Over the whole thing, Mrs. Neff had written in brown paper letters: "Everyone Wins when We Work as a Team!"

It reminded Tipani of Mom's couch blanket at home. That, too, was brown and green. She hated brown and green.

Tipani touched her own football, tracing the lines of the purple word written there in her own hand: "knots". She'd been so proud to write it, but it was crossed out now.

"What good does *that* do anyone?" one student had asked snidely, reading over her shoulder on his way to the pencil sharpener.

Tipani had thought about that and realized she didn't have an answer. What good *did* knots do in a classroom? So she'd crossed it out in bold black strokes. When Mrs. Neff came to ask why, Tipani said she'd just drawn more laces.

Her memory rewound further, to second grade. Before Dad's illness. Before Mom's absence.

Before the kids at school started being mean.

She'd had friends back then. At least, she'd thought she did. Every day at lunch she'd take out her orange - her favorite fruit, a gift from Mom - and bite into it, straight through the peel. The other kids would howl with laughter as she made funny faces and ripped it apart with her teeth.

They'd loved that trick.

They'd loved *her*.

Hadn't they?

Slowly, she pushed open the door. Mrs. Neff's lecturing voice faded out as the entire class turned to look.

"So glad you could join us today Tipani," Mrs. Neff said, holding out a hand. Tipani gave her the Roach's paper, folded now like a kite, and sat down at her desk. She kept her gaze down until Mrs. Neff began to talk to the class again, taking attention - and eyes - off of her.

Tipani always sat in the back corner where she could do her work in relative peace. Math was especially hard. Even when she got the answer right, the teacher said she'd done it wrong. She kept trying but her penciled numbers were often smudged by silent tears of frustration. Despite her love of stories, spelling wasn't much easier. The words never came out of her brain in the right order.

Still, she'd happily do all the math problems and vocabulary sheets in the world if she could just do them *alone*.

Not having any friends was often a blessing to Tipani. After all, friends expected to visit your house, and their parents wanted to meet yours. But at school it was way more like a curse, because the other kids weren't just not-her-friends. Sometime between third and fourth grade, they'd decided she was their enemy.

The leader of the anti-Tipani pack had come to the school then, from somewhere beachy and warm. His name was Chris Prophet, and it hadn't been long until he was the jewel of the school. He was handsome, with bouncy blond hair and big blue eyes that sparkled when he laughed, which was often. He was also nice to everyone, teachers and students alike, so they liked him too.

Well, *almost* everyone anyway.

For a reason Tipani still couldn't figure out, Chris hated her. He picked on her every moment he could, which was whenever the teacher had her attention elsewhere.

"Psst, Toilet Paper, whatcha reading?" he'd ask during free read time, and no matter what Tipani answered he had something bad to say about it. It was too babyish for a twelve-year-old. It was too boyish for a girl. It was dumb. Weird. Boring.

He'd trip her on the playground and tell her to watch where she was going.

He'd ask her if she'd had a bath lately and hold his nose. This always sent his pack of follower monkeys howling with laughter.

He'd pass notes signed in her name that said really embarrassing things, making sure that the teacher caught him and read them out loud to the class. That was his favorite game, because it humiliated her *and* got her in trouble.

Tipani usually acted like she didn't care; she'd learned it was the best way to end it fast. She used to tell the teacher, back in third grade when she was young and dumb, but Chris always had the upper hand. He was the golden boy everyone loved, and she was the smelly girl from Felony Flats, the neighborhood all the bad kids came from. Who was the teacher supposed to believe, anyway?

So when Chris passed by Tipani's desk later that afternoon as she worked on her science fair project – a copy of her Not Knot – she pretended not to see him, keeping her eyes on the loops and pulls of rope between her hands.

"What's that supposed to be?" he asked.

"A knot," she said at the rope.

Go away.

Quick as lightning, he grabbed it from her.

"Hey!" Tipani reached across the desk, but Chris pulled back just a little faster.

"How's a *knot* a science project?" he asked, turning it over in his hands. "It doesn't even *do* anything."

"It does too," she said proudly, forgetting to ignore him. "It's a puzzle. Impossible to untie."

He looked up with a smirk. "Sure it is."

"Try it," she challenged.

He picked at it a bit, then threw it on her desk with a snort. "Nobody's gonna care about a dumb knot."

"They will when I show how it works." She picked it up again, showing it to him like a collection of trophies. "There's tons of science in it, if you want to pull it apart right."

"As if *you'd* know," he said. "I bet *you* can't even untie it."

"I can," she said. "I'll do it tomorrow at the science fair. You'll see."

"Sure *Felony Flats*," he said. "Keep working hard and maybe someday you'll be promoted to head fry cook."

"BURN!" came the voice of Chris' number-one crony, Gabe White, from across the room. Chris laughed and joined the big redhead to work on their paper mâché solar system.

Tipani looked down at her knot with a grimace. Tomorrow. Tomorrow she'd show them.



Though her tardiness often led to walking in the mornings, Tipani took the same bus home with Chris and Gabe every afternoon. The boys got off ahead of her in a nice, tree-lined neighborhood before the bus crossed into Felony Flats.

"Look," Gabe said to Chris as they plopped down across the aisle from Tipani. "Toilet Paper's reading again. Why do you read so much anyway? Ya think you're gonna be smart someday?"

"BURN!" Chris said, and the boys exchanged a fist-bump. "Seriously though. You know poor people can't go to college, right?"

Tipani ignored this, pretending to continue reading.

"Hey, we're *talking* to you!"

The book was snatched from her hands and the bus erupted in laughter. The driver, closing the doors and pulling away from the curb, shouted at them all to be quiet.

"Ya gonna answer us now?" Gabe asked.

Reluctantly, Tipani turned to face the boys. "Answer what?"

Gabe snorted. "See? Dumb as dirt."

"It wouldn't matter if she was smart anyway," Chris said, eyeing the book in his hand like it was made of poop. "Felony Flats kids only have one future in life. You may as well start early, Toilet Paper, and make us some burgers now."

"BUUUUUURN!" Gabe squealed, and they fist-bumped again.

"*Ha-ha*," Tipani said, trying to keep the pain out of her voice. She wanted to ask why they hated her so much. What she said instead was, "can I have my book back now?"

Chris glanced at it again. "Weren't you reading some ghost story in class today?"

"Creep!" Gabe laughed.

"That's what I told her," Chris said with a big, fake sigh. "I said, 'you know people will talk.' But the poor girl is too dumb to listen to *my* advice."

"*I was*," Tipani said through her teeth. "Now I'm reading *that* one."

"*Edgar Allan Poe's Tales of Terror*?" Chris gave her a funny look. "You're seriously a freak. You know that right?"

Tipani didn't even justify that with a reply. Instead she took a swipe for the book, but Chris was faster, shoving his fist - and the book - out the window.

"GIVE IT BACK!"

"Girl!" the driver barked, his glare reflecting straight at her through the rearview. "Sit down and be quiet or I'll report you!"

"Yeah," Gabe said with a wide, brace-filled grin. "Don't be a *bad girl* or he'll report you."

Tipani sat down angrily, flipped her hood over her hair, and looked out her window. The book wasn't hers; it belonged to the library. If she couldn't get it back, she *would* be in trouble. And she'd been so excited to see it on the shelf!

Sniffing away tears that would only make things worse, she watched Chris out of the corner of her eye. He watched her back for a few moments, then seemed to decide he was bored with the game and pulled his hand in.

Empty.

"You *dropped* it! You... you... *jerk!*" Tipani lunged, her fingers ready to wrap around Chris' neck.

The bus screeched to a halt.

"I warned you, girl!" The driver opened the doors and jabbed with a hairy finger. "OUT! And expect a report on your vice principal's desk first thing in the morning!"

"But I'm nowhere near home!" Tipani argued.

Chris and Gabe's laughter heated the back of her head – and her anger – like a gas fire.

"OUT!" the driver yelled again. "NOW!"

It wasn't until the bus pulled away that she realized she'd left her backpack on the seat.