

Tipani Walker and the Nightmare Knot

Downloadable Excerpt

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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-eeeeee!"

"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. "Pleeeeeeease?"

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.