

# CHAPTER ONE

**June 20, 1839**

**Lafayette, Akansean Province, Nouvelle France**

Claire, blinking her eyes against the thick smoke, watched the ink-dipped porcupine quill drive into her skin in a rhythmic, tapping motion. She set her teeth. Tap. Tap. Blot. Tap, tap, tap. Blot.

Her mother, Zitkala-Zi, held tight to Claire's hands.

Her grandmother dunked the quill into a clay pot of blue pigment. Claire took this pause to breathe out through her nose. She closed her eyes. She had been asked to recite the story of her people—Sky Clan—and now she pictured the heroes of that tale as her grandmother resumed her tapping.

Two brothers. They fought alongside the gods in the Great Battle and triumphed. When the battle was done, the brothers pleaded with the gods. The people should not be forgotten—their deeds not lost to history. Young Brother was given control of the soil and the creatures upon it. Older Brother was given control of the sky and the dreams and spirits that lived within it. Earth Clan and Sky Clan.

“Almost done,” Grandmother said.

“Are you ready, Claire?” Zitkala-Zi asked.

Claire opened her eyes, “Yes.”

Grandmother stood and led Claire and her mother out of the lodge and into the sunshine. She held Claire's hand aloft and presented the blue rings that circled her forearm to the sky.

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Three sets of rings encircled three different arms—grandmother, daughter, granddaughter. “Claire, daughter of Zitkala-Zi, you are of Sky Clan. You enter the world now as a woman reborn. May the gods reveal your destiny in your dreams.”

Claire bowed to her grandmother and to her mother. She breathed in the summer air and peered out over the waving grass in her grandmother’s meadow. Cicadas buzzed out a relentless din. Claire shielded her eyes against the afternoon sun. Summer solstice—the longest day of the year. All of Lafayette—Indian and French—would be in town tonight for the festival. Far away, she could hear the bustle of the crowd already forming.

“Thank you,” Claire said, bowing.

Three Indian women were approaching from the houses behind her grandmother’s and Claire could tell they were there to talk about the festival. She dismissed herself and hiked back into French Lafayette, stopping at her father’s butcher shop on the way to her house.

“There’s my girl,” her father said. He wiped his big, freckled hands on his apron and came around the counter to greet her.

Claire held out her arm, “It’s finished.”

He brushed blond curls away from his eyes and took her hand in his own, examining her grandmother’s handiwork.

“You know, when your mother’s ceremony came, she was so nervous. Your great aunt was the head shaman at the time. Much scarier than Grandmother.”

Claire had heard this story a thousand times. Still, she had never been able to picture her mother in any state of unrest. Zitkala-Zi had gone through with her ceremony, married a white man, had his child, and still managed to retain shamanic rights in her clan. She had learned French and English and studied both Indian and white medicine to open her own clinic in Lafayette. Claire had practiced at her mother’s side since she could walk but had never heard Zitkala-Zi raise her voice or shed a tear. As far as

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Claire knew, her mother was harder than stone.

“When are you meeting Phileas and Sam?”

“They’re probably at the house right now.”

“Here,” he took a few francs from his pocket, “give this to Sam for the venison he brought in last night.”

“Alright. Anything else?”

He kissed the top of her head. “Don’t get into any trouble.”

“Of course not,” she said.

“Claire, I mean it. You’re an adult now.”

“Yes, Papa.” Claire meant it, too. She, Phileas, and Sam had never intended to get into trouble. Instead, it always seemed to find them.

When she reached her house, on the western side of town that was neither precisely Indian nor French, she found her friends waiting for her. Phileas stood and held his arms out for her.

“Have you done it? Are you a real Indian now?”

“Oh, please. I’m no different.” But it was a lie, Claire did feel different. And, as much as she didn’t want to admit it, she did feel more a part of Sky Clan.

“Let’s see them,” Sam said, coming down from the porch. Claire put her hand in his. The touch of his warm skin chilled her. She shivered in the summertime air.

“Does it hurt?”

“Yes.”

Claire caught Phileas grinning at her and blushed. She pulled her hand away from Sam’s, took the money from her shoulder bag, and shoved it awkwardly into his palm.

“This is for your deer.”

“Oh, good.”

“Come along, you two,” Phileas said. He, a head taller than his comrades, rested his arms over their shoulders and set the three of them marching toward town.

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Lafayette, like most towns in the French territory, was composed of both Indian and French inhabitants. Also like most towns, there was still a divide between them. Though their towns were a mix of French and Indian business, food, and history, the people remained separate. Claire's parents were one of only three families in town who had intermarried. Claire was the only half-Indian girl at the Ursuline Convent where she received her French education and, while her dark hair had the curl of her father's family, she could not be mistaken for white. Her dusky skin, black eyes, and hooked nose all came from Zitkala-Zi. In the beginning, Claire had made friends but as she grew older and still more different, she found herself alone.

"I can't believe it's already Midsummer," Phileas said, breaking her train of thought. They strode down Main Street, past their town's modest statue of Napoleon, past the bakery and taverns, past Lafayette's modest inn and post office—all of them closed. Gradually they ran out of buildings but the cobblestone street continued until Claire, Phileas, and Sam came to the foot of an ancient mound. Like every year since the French and Indians had come together to form Lafayette, the entire town had turned out for the celebration. Women were selling cider and beer from stands and families munched on popped corn. Young women from Claire's school danced with those from Phileas' as a group of French musicians played the latest songs. The sun would set in a couple hours and small bonfires would be lit around the bottom of the mound. The music and dancing would continue until dawn, when Claire's grandmother and the other elders from Sky Clan would perform the summer solstice ritual from within the woodhenge atop the mound.

Claire stared up at the timber circle. She wondered whether she would ever conduct the solstice ceremony, if she would ever even truly be part of Sky Clan. She looked down at the blue rings encircling her arm.

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“I’ll get us something to drink,” Sam said, as he walked off to the cider stand where his aunt was helping the other townswomen.

Claire sighed. While she loved the food, the music, and the bonfires, she hated these town get-togethers. She watched the petticoats swirling on the dance floor, listened to the girls’ laughter over the music and the crowd.

Phileas nudged her shoulder. “Oh, stop looking so gloomy.”

Claire directed her attention to Sam instead. He kissed his aunt on each cheek and handed her his new francs.

“You should talk to him.”

“Absolutely not.”

“You can’t go on like this—mooning after him forever. Once I’ve gone off to University, it’ll just be the two of you and then you’ll be stuck with no one to talk to about your undying love for him.”

“Phil, I can’t.”

Sam brought back three tankards of beer. Claire and Phileas waved a thank you to Sam’s mother before they all turned and walked to the farthest bench they could find, under an old oak. They sat and Phileas fished in his vest pocket.

“I want to show you both something,” he said, withdrawing a silver watch.

Claire gasped as Phileas placed it in her hand, “You finished it?”

For months, each time Claire had visited the manor house in which Phileas lived, she’d found him in his workshop covered in smudges, wearing a set of brassy glasses, and tinkering with the watch. It told the time and day as well as the phases of the moon.

She watched the second hand tick its way around the pearly face then handed it to Sam.

“It’s really nice, Phil.”

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“Thank you.”

Sam handed the watch back and took a long look at the celebration before saying anything else.

“I need to talk to you both. I’m leaving. At the end of summer, I’m going to New Orleans to work with my cousin. He needs some help at the docks and...”

“What,” Claire blurted out, interrupting him. “But, Sam. Papa could surely apprentice you in the shop. You don’t have to leave.”

“I do,” he said. “I’m sorry but I just can’t stay in Lafayette. I need to find my own way.”

She sighed. “Both of you gone? It was already bad enough with Phileas leaving.”

Phileas was scheduled to leave at the end of summer. Once his father finally came to terms with the fact that his son wouldn’t be taking over the family business and, in fact, wouldn’t turn out at all like himself or his older sons, he pulled old, family strings to secure a place for Phileas at the University of Paris.

Claire stared at the celebrating townspeople. She watched her classmates swirl, giggle, blush, and curtsy. She thought about being left with these young women as her only companions and her palms started sweating.

For as long as she remembered, Claire hadn’t really been a part of the feminine society she’d been expected to take up with. She was too white to socialize with the Indians, too Indian to socialize with the whites. Too much of a tomboy to even approach the other girls. Her hands were coarse from climbing trees and her skirts were always muddy. Phileas and Sam were the only friends she’d ever needed—the only ones she’d ever wanted.

“Both of you?” Claire said, almost to herself.

“Oh, Claire. My dear girl,” Phileas put his arm around her and leaned over as if to kiss her cheek but whispered to her instead, “You’ll just have to join the Ursulines.”

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Sam laughed and Claire shoved Phileas. He fell with unmistakable melodrama into the grass, keeping his tankard upright the whole time, then sat on the ground laughing into his beer.

“You’re ridiculous,” Claire said. “The Ursulines?”

“You’re right, you’d scarcely last one day with the stern sisters of the Elm Street Convent.”

“You think I couldn’t do it?”

Sam shook his head, “Definitely not.”

Phileas was just getting up as two of his classmates emerged from the tree line behind them. They were older than he and, though not as tall, much broader and burlier. The bigger of the two, with a long, black ponytail pushed Phileas hard. He went toppling forward but righted himself before hitting the ground.

The other young man Claire recognized as one of the Michel boys—one of the few families in town with more money than Phileas’ father.

“What are you doing, Phileas?”

“I don’t want any trouble,” Phileas said, standing up straight. Sam stood as well, along with Claire. They faced the boys down.

“You ought to be partaking in the celebration. Dancing with a pretty girl. Or have you found a pretty girl already?” he moved toward Claire but Sam stepped in front of her.

The pony-tailed goon sauntered closer to the three of them, “Aw, come on now, Eddy. You know Phileas’d rather be dancing with this one here.” He put a hand on Sam’s shoulder. Sam shoved him backward, into Edgar. The two of them flushed, and as they fell off balance, their hatefully jovial faces turned to menace. They both started back toward Phileas and Sam but Claire stepped in at the last second and took both of the boys’ hands in her own before they could protest.

“Stop,” she said, looking into Edgar’s eyes. She remembered what a sweet boy he had been when he was a child. She

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remembered the way he and his grandmother had visited the poor and took supplies to the people in the furthest reaches of the woods surrounding Lafayette. When she died, his raising had been taken over by his father—a notoriously stingy man.

“You don’t want to do this,” she told Edgar. His face became vacant. He was pliable.

She focused on Edgar’s lackey. “Go back to the party.”

Edgar and his friend nodded.

“Leave us alone,” she said with finality. The boys turned and ambled toward the festivities.

Phileas leaned close to her, “You know, Edgar is the richest beau here, Claire.”

“Phil—” she admonished.

“What? Look, they’ve scuffed my boots and torn Sam’s vest.”

Sam looked down, “I think it was already—“

“No, I’m quite sure they did it.”

“Alright, alright.” Claire shrugged and cleared her throat, “Edgar?”

Edgar came back, his eyes still clouded with confusion. She took his hand again and peered into his eyes.

“Edgar, show me your purse.”

He took the purse from his inside pocket and opened it for her.

“Give me—” she looked at Phileas who held up ten fingers, “five francs.”

Phileas coughed but she ignored him. Edgar counted out the francs and laid them down, one by one, onto her palm.

“Now go back to the party.”

He turned again and walked away.

“You could’ve taken the whole thing.”

“I didn’t want to. Besides, I promised Papa I wouldn’t be getting into trouble.” She turned to Sam. “Here—a going away

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present from the Michel family.”

She put the francs in his hand, feeling the warmth of his fingers, the roughness of his palm. It had been Sam who had first seen her gift. Phileas had known next. It was always to each other that they had confessed their deepest secrets.

When Claire’s gift surfaced, it was with Sam and Phileas that she first understood the power and limitations of her ability. As Phileas gradually became aware that he cared not a wit for girls and yearned instead for the company of other boys, it was to Sam and Claire that he divulged his longings. And, when Sam learned of his heritage—that he was the illegitimate great-grandson of the infamous traitor to the British crown, and before that, enemy of the French—General George Washington—it was Claire and Phileas who first consoled him, then joked with him about his own swimming ability—always dog-paddling rather than taking full strokes.

“I’ll bet *you* couldn’t get across the Delaware either!” Claire had belted out, falling back with laughter.

Always, they had been one another’s secret keepers, friends and family. The sun was finally setting. The bonfires were lit. The dancing and singing continued but Claire, Phileas and Sam stayed on their bench, watching from a distance.

Hours passed. They talked and they didn’t. As the waxing moon rose, their impending separation became something almost tangible to Claire. How many evenings like this had they spent together? Under these very stars? How many would they spend apart?

Sam finally stood, “I need to get going. I told my aunt I’d be home before dawn to help with the baking.”

Sam’s aunt and uncle had taken him in when he was abandoned by his parents after they paid a visit to Lafayette when he was a baby. His Uncle Jerald had been a carpenter but died when Sam was only five. His Aunt Mary had been a pastry chef

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but her arthritis was now so advanced that she baked at home when she could and sent Sam to town with the goods. Claire knew that this was why Sam was leaving town. If he could find steady employment in New Orleans, he could send the money back to his aunt and she wouldn't have to work anymore. Even if he apprenticed at her father's butcher shop, he wouldn't make enough money to support them both for a long time. He couldn't be independent.

"We'll come help out," Claire said. "I'm sure poor Mary will be exhausted after tonight; she could use us. And so could you."

"Absolutely. I'll bring along some of Father's British tea for her," Phileas said. His father and brothers were all in New Britannia on business and, as much as Phileas relished time alone in his workshop, he hated eating by himself. He'd already been to Claire's house for breakfast every day for a week.

They stood and stretched. The musicians were winding down now, playing only slower songs. An old waltz started up and Phileas bowed to Claire. "My lady. One dance before the night is through?"

She curtsied and took his hand. While clumsy in most other civilized aspects of society, she was a capable, light-footed dancer. She beamed at Phileas and stepped in time with him. Between his looks and wealth he could've had his choice of young women in Lafayette or the entire French territory for that matter. Instead, she hoped that someday, somehow he would be happy. Maybe a fresh start in Paris would be good for him. Maybe someday she could visit him.

Phileas split away from her before the dance was through and gestured for Sam to take over, "I fear she's broken my toe, Sam. I'll have to sit this one out."

"I have not and you know it. Stop it," she laughed, playfully pushing him away.

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Sam took his place—one hand holding hers, the other around her waist. He wasn't nearly as graceful as Phileas. His steps were plodding. He'd not benefitted from the formal training that both Claire and Phileas had endured. Still, Claire would rather dance with Sam than anyone else. In a span of time that Claire couldn't name, she had begun to think of him differently. More than a friend. More than a crib-mate. She could barely look at him without blushing, could barely be this close to him without wanting to kiss him.

She couldn't stand the thought of no longer seeing him and so she stared at him in the moonlight—trying to memorize the way he was in this moment. His dark skin and curly hair. The little scars above his eyebrows. His gentle, quiet nature.

The music stopped.

Claire, Phileas, and Sam walked away from the mound, leaving the celebration behind. They split off when they came to Claire's house. Phileas promised to pick up Claire on the way to Sam's in the morning.

"Be careful, you two," she whispered after them.

As she walked up the stairs and into her room, she felt that something was wrong. Was it something in the air? Was a storm coming? Somewhere in the distance, she heard a boom. Then another. Could it be thunder?

She looked out the window in her room, expecting to see dark clouds and saw, instead, only the shining moon, surrounded by stars. She had no way of knowing, as she crawled into bed, that, in the garden they'd played in since they were children, Sam's blood soaked into the soil.



# CHAPTER TWO

**June 21, 1839**

**Lafayette, Akansean Province, Nouvelle France**

It was Mary that Claire saw first. Her hair was still pulled into a low, silver bun and she was still wearing the same plain dress and apron she'd worn the night before. The apron was still crisp and white but for a bright bloom of blood. It spread outward, over her chest and pooled under her body.

Claire's hands shot to her mouth as she took in the scene. She felt last night's drinks lurching up her throat. She knelt, careful as she could, next to the woman. She worried suddenly that she might lose her balance and fall on top of Mary's body. The idea sickened her but her thoughts swirled into an awareness of what she and Phileas were supposed to be doing there.

"Sam. Where's Sam?" From her hands and knees, now cold and wet with Mary's blood, she frantically looked around the parlor she had so often occupied as a girl. The parlor had always been filled with noise—whether it was Jerald playing the violin before he died, Claire, Sam and Phileas making a ruckus, or Mary's gentle humming—it had always been joyfully loud. Now the house was quiet. Claire peered up at Phileas whose jaw was so tightly set that white marks appeared in right angles just below his earlobes. Without a word, he thrust out his hand and Claire took it. Phileas held fast so her slick, red fingers didn't slip from his.

Like children on a dark forest path, Phileas and Claire

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moved through the house. The kitchen—empty. The dining room—empty. They walked up the stairs, conscious of every squeak and breath of the wood. Sam’s room—empty.

“Claire!”

Claire jumped at the sound of her own name and turned suddenly to find Phileas peering out the window at the end of the hall.

“It’s Sam,” he said.

Rushing to the window, Claire tripped over a loose board and slammed her open palms against the glass, leaving a smear of blood on the pane. She stared down at the back of the house where Mary had always kept a pristine herb garden. Just beside a young peach tree lay Sam, motionless and pale.

Together, Claire and Phileas stormed out of the house and streaked through the yard until they tumbled onto the ground next to their friend. Claire put her hand to Sam’s heart.

“It’s beating,” she gasped. “It’s beating. He’s alive.”

She ripped his vest and shirt open. His blood was a deep scarlet, still warm as it flowed over her hands. Claire took a breath and made herself study the wounds. She raised his head. A pulpy lump seeped blood from his crown. He had been hit with something hard. A gunshot wound, just above his heart, painted his chest red. Through and through; the bullet had exited his shoulder. But the second shot, the one doing the most damage, was lodged in his liver.

“I think whoever did this has long gone,” Phileas shouted, as he ran around the perimeter, pointing at a group of horse tracks. They led away from Sam’s land, into the forest.

Claire nodded to Phileas then pressed her left palm to Sam’s belly. She pulled a strand of hair out of her eyes with the other, leaving a streak of red along her cheekbone. Quickly changing positions, she pressed her right hand against the wound as she moved closer to Sam’s face.

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“Sam!” she yelled. “Sam! Can you hear me? Sam!”

Sam’s eyelids fluttered and through his black lashes, Claire caught a flash of amber—brighter than usual. A breath rumbled within his lungs and came out as a deep growl. Claire squinted at him then stared up at Phileas. He gaped down at her.

“What can I do?”

For all the years Phileas had spent tinkering with machines, running steam through miniature boats, fancying heaps of scrap metal into a mechanical menagerie, and finely tuning the tiny springs within the clockwork of his devices, he was—it occurred to Claire—completely useless in fixing Sam.

“Give me your handkerchief.”

Kneeling, he drew out his freshly cleaned handkerchief, embroidered prettily with the letters, P.F. and handed it over to Claire. She stuffed it against the hole in Sam’s side as she spoke.

“Take off your coat and spread it over him. Then, I want you to get up, get on your horse, and ride as fast as you can into town. Find my mother. Bring her back. Get my father to find any of the Earth Clan healers and bring them as well.”

As soon as she was finished speaking, Phileas had gone. His coat held in the rest of Sam’s warmth as she kept her hand and the handkerchief to Sam’s wound. She leaned close to his face. His breath came out in coarse, trembling puffs.

“Come on Sam. Just breathe you stupid lump! Please, just breathe.”

As Claire held on to him, watching him struggle for air, she remembered the summer before. She and Sam were in this very garden, swinging lacrosse sticks at one another. Sam’s natural physical prowess was highlighted by the fact that he hadn’t even broken a sweat while Claire could feel the red in her cheeks. Her lungs burned from exertion as they play-fought, using their lacrosse sticks in place of rapiers and garden stakes with words like “rosemary” and “dill” written down the side as daggers.

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Watching from the shade of the porch, Phileas kept time for their matches and judged the points. It was a game they had been playing since Phileas' mother, Constance—the only one of their parents to have been born on the mainland—told them all a story about a group of French soldiers called the Grey Musketeers. She died of consumption two years later. Still, when the days were long, or when one of them needed cheering up, it was this game that they always turned to. Their rules were a long evolved amalgamation of real fencing rules and nonsensical tenets fervently adhered to since childhood.

“Point!” Phileas called and wrote it down.

Claire made to argue. “No. Absolutely not!”

Sam only laughed as Phileas said, “Claire, he had right of way. Stop fussing and get back to your line.”

Although Sam's skill and stamina made him the better swordsman, Claire was cunning and fast and often snuck in points. She faked toward his knee with her rapier. When he lunged, she whirled around and stuck him in the gut with her wooden dagger.

“Point!” Phileas yelled again.

Sam doubled over, laughing. “Yes, alright. I let you get that one!”

“You most certainly did not!” Claire shouted, and bowed with a flourish. “You just never saw me coming.”

And with that, Sam dropped his sticks and bolted forward, tackling Claire to the ground. Sunlight filled the memory-version of that day with a golden haze. The light in her memory seemed to glow. The image of Phileas, the best swordsman among them, coming down from the porch with his own stick in hand slowed to a crawl in her head. The sound of Sam's laughter mixed with the wind. She knew the smell of summer, and sweat, and sweet strawberries had filled her nose. She had laughed until she cried, until she could not catch her breath.

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Now, as she stared at Sam, she was crying again.

Now, she was fighting for air.

It seemed like days before Claire heard the rapid hoof beats that signaled her mother's approach. Zitkala-Zi swept off her horse with a silent grace. Her hair swung in a black curtain around her as she knelt at Sam's side. She whispered in Siouan—her Okáxpá root language, long swallowed up by a larger tongue. She took Sam's face in her long, brown hands as Phileas rode up to the scene and came off his horse with a thud.

Finally, after she had studied Sam's wounds and Claire's treatment of them, Zitkala-Zi locked eyes with her daughter. They were the same in shape and darkness, a brown so deep it was like looking into a well. Claire breathed and nodded to her mother who pulled back the coat Phileas had spread over his friend. "You've done right, Claire. This is good work."

For a brief moment, Claire felt herself smile, proud to receive some of her mother's seldom-offered praise. Then, Claire fell silent as her mother took over Sam's care. She watched as Zitkala-Zi ordered Phileas into the house to boil water and collect clean linen to bind Sam's wounds.

"Should we move him?" Phileas asked, "Should we take him inside?"

Claire's mother shook her head, clucking her tongue as she studied Sam's worst wound. "No. He is too broken. We need to take this bullet out first."

Claire held pressure on Sam's side while Zitkala-Zi opened her medicine bag and extracted a Euro-Indian mix of implements and medicines: an obsidian bladed knife, pouches of snakeroot, ginger and yarrow. Phileas returned with the boiling water and Zitkala-Zi cleaned her knife along with a curved needle and a length of slick, black cord. She cleaned her hands and instructed Claire to do the same. Thus, they went about mending the wound in Sam's shoulder.

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As instructed, Phileas built a small fire in the herb garden and threw in snatches of balsam fir needles while Sam, conscious for a brief moment, opened his eyes and coughed out a mouthful of dark blood. Warm droplets flecked Claire's cheek. She kept her hand pressed to Sam's side.

When Zitkala-Zi had finished sewing up Sam's shoulder, she motioned for Claire to move. Reluctantly, Claire let go of Phileas' soaked handkerchief. Her mother took her place, removed the cloth and carefully studied the wound. Claire heard Zitkala-Zi muttering something under her breath and watched as she dipped her fingertips in Sam's blood, brought them up to her nose and tongue. Zitkala-Zi spat over her shoulder and took a swig of snakeroot water then spit that out as well. Claire took Phileas' hand and watched as her mother leaned in close to Sam's face and opened his eyes, one after the other. Claire's mother shook her head then rocked back and resumed her work on Sam's side.

"What's going on? I don't understand." Phileas whispered.

Claire shook her head. "I don't know," she said, "There's something she isn't saying."

The fire, with bits of balsam fir still lodged in its belly, popped and cracked behind them. The heady smoke made their eyes water and the mid-summer day felt somehow colder for its presence. They fell into a daze as they watched Claire's mother work.

Soon Claire's father, along with two Earth Clan healers rode up from the front of the house. The healers immediately joined Zitkala-Zi, muttering under their breath in Siouan, opening their own medicine bags, leaning over Sam who grew paler and paler with each passing moment. Claire's father dismounted and ran straight to her.

"Oh, my little girl, what's happened?" he cried, as he embraced her.

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Wrapped in the strong, steady arms of her father, Claire felt herself break. The fear of losing Sam forever mingled with the bitterness of her feelings from the night before and, suddenly, the horror of what she had seen inside washed over her—Mary’s body so cool and gray, her blood filling the cracks in the floor. “Mary is dead. She was shot.”

Claire’s father pulled away to stare at her and when his eyes connected with hers, she nodded. She watched his gaze shift over her shoulder, toward the house where she and Phileas had spent so many days as babes, so many afternoons as children, so many evenings lately.

“I’ll have to go inside and find her, Claire. Alright?” he said, kissing the top of her head. “And then I am going to go into town to find Capitaine Dubois and Mary’s priest.”

“Yes, Papa.” Wiping her eyes, Claire nodded. She felt like a child until she saw her blood-painted hands. She knew she must have smudged it over her face as well but she didn’t care. She turned back to Sam and her mother and the Earth Clan healers and watched the work as Phileas wrapped his arm around her shoulders. She slid her hand behind his thin waist and they held tight to one another as the sun drifted high above them, erasing their shadows.

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It was afternoon by the time they finished working. It was nighttime before the group of Indian healers, both Earth and Sky Clan, finally got Sam back to Claire’s house where he would be kept under constant watch.

Claire watched the lamplight bounce off Sam’s face. His dark features were striking in the amber hues of the lamp. His head, side and shoulder were all heavily wrapped—linen over poultices, over mended flesh. Claire ran her fingertips over Sam’s cheek, hot with fever. Desperately, she wanted him to stir.

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Wanted him to open his eyes. Wanted him to speak. The air in the room smelled of salt and herbs. It was the scent of the healing—or the dying.

She felt the soft touch of Phileas' hand on her shoulder as he approached Sam's bedside. He had spent the last hour at Sam's house with Claire's father, the priest, and one shaman from each clan. Claire turned and padded with him into the hallway. The click of the door as it gently closed seemed to suck the sound from the entire house.

The young man before her seemed forever changed.

Phileas' blonde hair was streaked pink and gray—blood and smoke. His well-manicured nails were ragged and gritty, his lovely new riding coat was caked with muck and scarlet. Always such a bright green, his eyes had become solemn. Claire wondered whether she had changed. What might her eyes look like now?

Then, Phileas' mouth, against all odds, produced a smile. Weak as the small movement was, and exhausted as she could be, she felt herself smile back. Their friend could be dead. But he wasn't. His heart might have stopped beating. But it hadn't. And though they would be soon attending one funeral, at least it was not two.

Zitkala-Zi approached them in the hallway. Her look was stern and she smelled strongly of healing herbs.

"You two go clean yourselves. You reek of blood. Your father is making a supper downstairs."

"But Sam—"

"I will take care of Sam. Now you need to take care of yourselves."

Claire and Phileas skulked off to the washroom where they found steaming buckets of water. They had been bathing together since childhood and though Claire's fondness for Sam provided far too much embarrassment to change in front of *him*,

## Silver Tongue

she wordlessly accepted Phileas' help with her laces. She took his coat and vest, and watched as he carefully laid his pocket watch on the top shelf of the bathroom's armoire.

They slipped out of their shoes, realizing only now the amount of mud they must have tracked all over the house. Claire's white dress, blood splattered over what had been faint, yellow daisies, fell in a heap on the floor as Claire finally stared at her reflection. She looked every bit as tired and worn as Phileas. This day had changed something inside of them, had changed something between them. She could feel the change, could sense it all around her.

She sat in the big, English-made tub as Phileas dumped the bucket of water over her head. And, as the water ran pink off her copper skin, Claire felt the familiarity between them grow into something even stronger, harder, more resilient. The connection that ran between she, Phileas and the boy who slept in a deep fever down the hall, had shaped into something new.

A strange calm swept over her, enveloped her and she breathed out through the hot water that coursed down her face. Together, Phileas and Claire exited the washroom, ate a meal in silence, and made their way back into the room where Sam slept.

Claire took out two of the bedrolls her mother's family had given her, and spread them out on the floor. Inside, the whole house and especially Sam's room were quiet. Next to her, Sam breathed raggedly. His hand dangled from the bed and she took it in her left as Phileas grasped her right.

"We're here, Sam. We aren't going anywhere."