

# FIRE SONG

ADAM GARNET JONES



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Designed by Emma Dolan

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*Fire Song* takes place in Canada and as such Shane refers to the land he lives on as the 'reserve'; in the U.S., the more common term is 'reservation.' Commonly used Anishinaabemowin words and phrases that appear throughout the story are set in italics.

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For the ones we lost, and for the ones who fight to stay



## CHAPTER ONE

Shane is awake, wishing he wasn't. The alarm clock makes a soft warning click before flooding the room with staticky Top 40. *Too loud*. Shane reaches an arm out from under the covers and hits snooze for the third time. It feels better in bed. Not good, but better. As long as his door is closed, no one wants anything from him. No one is asking if he's okay, *as if he'd tell them the truth anyways*. He'll have to make a move eventually, but if he can coax himself into a Drift, he can delay a little longer.

Sometimes when he's upset, the Drift comes in and takes him out like a rogue wave. *Whoooooosh*—he's somewhere else. Other days, if he can get his mind to stop spinning and if he breathes in the right way, he can call the Drift in. Shane takes a long sip of air, praying for it to fill every unseen part of him. When his chest starts to burn, he lets out the breath in a gentle, focused stream. The Drift begins as a tingle. It starts in his fingertips, then creeps up his arms and over the tender flesh of his neck until it blooms over his eyelids and bursts into a constellation of squirming silver pinpricks that fill his field of vision. Warmth

pulses through his center and guides him out of his body. If only his whole life could have the rush of sweetness that comes during a Drift, when the weight of his limbs drops away and the purest part of him rises high up through the dripping ceiling and out over the top of his house.

He floats above the tree line and passes into that magic half-way-place between the earth and the sky. Even on his worst days, the snaking line of the creek and the tree-furred shores of the silver water can stop his heart. It's the home of his ancestors. The place of prophecy, where food grows upon the water. A place where, if you can fly away from the level of the earth and see it all with the eyes of a crow, there will always be balance. No matter how much struggle is skewing the edges of the circle down below. Maybe that's what his sister was looking for—the eyes of a crow at the end of a rope. *Stop thinking of her*, Shane tells himself. He shifts his attention to the breeze blowing over his face and lets it rinse the thought clean away.

Shane floats out over the houses; first the little old ones like his that have been here the longest, and then on to the crisp siding and double-glazed windows of the bigger places built by people with money. The edge of the reserve is dotted with trailers. People on TV talk about trailers like they are the crap, but Tara's is bigger than Shane's house. And if you want to you can pick them up and move them anywhere you want. Not that he's ever seen one move once it got put down. People are that way too, unless you have your eyes on school. Most people think that if you're smart, you won't stick around long. And if you graduate and don't take off to the city then you probably don't have much to offer the band anyway. One time Roberta, the school counselor, told Shane that

education is like the golden ticket Charlie found in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Shane mentioned it to Tara later and she said that a kid who licks wallpaper and ends up living with a crazy old man in a purple velvet suit isn't such a great role model. She may be right.

The wind changes and Shane Drifts over the dirt road that leads to the sun-bleached wooden benches of the powwow grounds, where the air meets the water at the edge of the lake. People from all over gather here at the height of summer to catch up with faraway family, to show off new babies and new regalia, to sing and dance and laugh and eat, and snag. But even when there's no one there, the powwow grounds have the shine of the people lighting it up from the inside. It's like the room of a dying man or the ground where a midwife stands, reaching into the edge of the spirit world. Sacred, you know? His sister, Destiny, was almost crowned powwow princess here last year. She would have been, too, if she had taken the time to braid her hair and finish the details on her regalia the way the other girls did. The judges probably thought she didn't care enough. But she did care. Not about pulling her hair back or finishing the hemline of her regalia. She just wanted to dance. And she had more grace, more of the healing power of that jingle dress dance, in her than anyone he's ever seen. Shane loved watching her feet move like a whisper over the ground, impossibly soft and quick, almost floating in her moccasins. She was so ...

And just like that he's back in his bed again, eyes bulging, and gasping for air like a pickerel flipped onshore. There's nothing like the half-awake peace of forgetting for a few minutes that your little sister is dead, before reality busts in and pisses all over

everything. Shane had felt sad and angry when people in his family and community passed on to the spirit world, but nothing could have prepared him for the sick heat that has been twisting in his guts since the night Destiny did it. No one tells you how much you can hurt and still look normal on the outside.

Shane takes deep breath after deep breath, trying to get into another Drift, but it's no use. He's not going anywhere. A drop of gray water hangs from the ceiling. It gathers moisture from the soggy drywall, growing and drooping until it splashes into an overflowing bucket. Ripples race out to touch the edges of the bucket, and then disappear. Shane watches the drops grow heavy and fall, each transforming into the energy of tiny waves that dissipate into nothingness. David would see those ripples and say that everything is alive. Shane's science teacher would say that energy never dies. The idea is the same, but nothing explains what happens when those ripples crash against the wall and the water goes flat.

The hot steam of the shower lets Shane pretend for a few more minutes that the world is a bad dream. When he steps out, water runs down the tips of his shaggy hair and falls on his wide brown shoulders. He accidentally catches his own eyes in the mirror and quickly turns away. Looking in your own eyes can mess you up when you're lying to yourself that everything is going to be okay.

Shane pulls out his mourning outfit for the memorial. Black sneakers with black pants and the black button-up shirt that only gets worn when someone dies. The fabric pulls tight over his chest, gaping a little around the top button when he stands with his shoulders straight. It will have to do. After Destiny died, going to the city for a new shirt was the last thing on his mind.

Things like a shirt being a little small—the normally insignificant details of life that go unnoticed by everyone else—have a habit of crawling under his skin and latching on. He never feels right unless everything is where and how it's supposed to be. But now that Destiny is gone, something will always be wrong. He will feel the stab of her absence in every passing moment, forever.

Shane notices a gray smudge on his elbow. He turns to search for something to wipe it with. His mother would say, *Quit fussing like that. Boys should be a little bit messy.* As far as Shane can tell, being a boy—or being the right kind of boy—has something to do with not caring. It has to do with leaping without looking and speaking without choosing your words. And so after one too many comments like *Why are you standing with your hands on your hips?* Shane tried to leave the dishes undone every once in a while. He tried to abandon stray hairs in the sink, to aim a few splashes of urine over the lip of the toilet. But it didn't come naturally, and he could never figure out how much was too much.

Then one day a white lady on TV said, *When getting dressed for the day, every woman should remove one unnecessary item from her outfit.* That gave him an idea. He stopped trying to leave spontaneous messes, and returned to cleaning his room and dressing as usual, but with one small change. Before leaving his room each day, Shane would throw a shirt or a stack of books on the floor. He did the same thing with his clothes. He made sure everything was clean and matching, then threw it off by wearing one sock in an odd color, or messing his hair up a bit, just in case his mom got to feeling like he wasn't messy enough to be a real boy. Since Destiny died he hasn't had to try. The mess has

multiplied as though a door were left open and their home has been taken over by careless, slovenly ghosts. Dirty laundry festers in small damp piles. Dishes lie molding in the sink.

And suddenly she's there. Destiny. Sitting on the edge of the bed in ripped goth-girl fishnets. Their eyes meet, and it's like hangover soup in winter. Her warmth fills him up and drapes itself around his heart. Shane takes in a shaky breath. It hurts to miss her this much. Destiny laughs and tells him he looks like an undertaker. "Why so serious!?" she says in her best Joker voice. He smiles. She always knew how to make him feel better. He holds her eyes with his, counting down the seconds until his breathing returns to normal and he's left alone in the room again. It's the same way each time—she comes in a moment of panic and then washes away like a dream. Shane once heard an old man on the radio talking about how his arm got ripped off in a farming accident. But even after the man knew his arm was gone, even half a lifetime later, he could still feel it attached to his body. When Shane heard that, he thought the old guy was just making a play for attention. Now he knows. Just because something is gone doesn't mean it isn't there. Shane's brain understands that he'll never joke with his sister again, but his blood and bones and spirit refuse to accept it. Goddamn it hurts.

The blast of a horn from the driveway startles him. It's Uncle Pete come to drive him and his mom to the school for the memorial.

Shane stops outside the door to his sister's room. It's covered in stickers and drawings and a sign with *Destiny* written in bubble letters. "Mom?" No answer. Shane pushes the door open gently. Soft light streams in through a gap in the purple curtains. Destiny

liked it to be dark in there. In better days their mom, Jackie, always burst into Destiny's room and tugged the curtains open, insisting that sunlight is the fifth food group. Destiny would flop onto her bed, shrieking and flailing her arms like a vampire being exposed to sunlight. And she would keep it up—her record was ten straight minutes of dramatic hissing and clawing at the air—until Jackie closed them again. *That's my little bloodsucker*, Jackie would say, kissing the top of Destiny's head.

Jackie is there in the room now, slumped over like part of the bedding. Since Destiny died, his mother's face and hair have fallen slack, like a flag without wind. Evie sits quietly next to her. She's watching Jackie from behind thick glasses that make her eyes appear much smaller, giving her the face of a wise old mole. Evie probably seems like she's Shane's grandmother but she's not—his grandmothers are long gone—but anybody who's got trouble in their life and who doesn't let the church boss them around goes to Evie for help. That's what elders do.

Shane puts his hand on Jackie's shoulder. She presses her face into his hip and begins to cry, saying something that sounds like *I'msorryI'msorryI'msorryI'msorryI'msorry*, but it might not even be words at all. Evie reaches out and rubs Jackie's back.

"I know, Mom. It's okay." Shane picks up her stiff black flats. "Here. Let's get these on you." Jackie pulls away and curls her feet under the bed like a child. Shane watches the jumbled shapes and lines of her face, searching for clues that will help him predict what's coming. It's like learning how to read all over again, but dangerous.

"No—I'm not going. I don't need everybody looking at me like that."

“Like what?”

“You know ...”

“They just want to help. They just want you to feel better.” Jackie frowns, running her fingernails over her scalp. “C’mon, Mom. We need to go. It’ll only be an hour.” Shane takes her elbow to help her up. Jackie twists away from him and tumbles back on the bed.

“I’m not going! What’s wrong with you!?” Jackie looks at Shane’s neat black clothes as if seeing him for the first time. “Who’re you trying to impress, anyways?”

The house shakes with the weight of Uncle Pete’s footsteps on the kitchen floor. *Not now*, Shane thinks. He’s had enough trouble getting his mom moving without Pete in the way. If only Shane could put him into a press, shrink him down until he’s too small to do any damage. The size of a car battery or a bag of road salt. If Shane were in Pete’s place, he would feel his sister’s loss and imagine her ragged nerves. He would attempt some small measure of grace, considering. He would leave his boots at the door.

“C’mon, Jacks, it’s time to go,” Pete barks as he clomps his way through the kitchen, rattling the dishes in their shelves and filling up the door to Destiny’s room like a swollen cork in a bottle.

Jackie’s face twists up at him. “Get outta here, Pete! I don’t want you in this room. No one should even be in this room.”

Pete sucks in a big breath of air, ready to dig into Jackie the way he would any other day, but Evie stops him with a gentle touch of her hand on his shoulder. Pete would probably love to shove her hand away and give her a piece of his mind too, but he knows he can’t. That’s granny power. Pete shakes his head like a drunk fighting off sleep, then stomps out mumbling, “I’ll be waiting.”

Evie settles into a chair across from Jackie and clears her throat. “I brought something for you.”

Jackie looks up. “I don’t need anything.” Evie pulls a small brown leather pouch from her bag and holds it out for Jackie. Shane has seen it before. Evie keeps it full of the sacred medicines—cedar, sage, sweetgrass, and tobacco.

“This’ll protect you from that bad spirit.” Jackie’s eyes pass over the leather, dark and shiny from its time in ceremony.

“Take it, Mom.”

For Shane’s whole life, the first thing they did after having a pee and brushing their teeth in the morning was smudge with a mix of white sage and sweetgrass that they had picked with Evie and David in the summers. They would gather together in the front window while Jackie lit the smudge and bathed herself in the smoke. Shane loved seeing the white smoke curling up over the soft curve of their mother’s shoulders; they loved the flutter of her eyelids as she prayed. When she was finished, Jackie would hold the smudge bowl for Shane and fan the embers with a feather. Destiny always prayed last; she liked to bury the ashes under one of the big trees in the yard. All that stopped when Destiny died. No more medicines. No more ceremony. Another thing lost. Evie extends her arm to Jackie. “Take it.” Shane silently wills Jackie to reach out for the medicines, but Jackie pushes the bag away. The corners of Evie’s mouth droop.

“Shane! Let’s go!” Pete calls from outside the house.

Shane lingers at the threshold of his sister’s room. “See you later, Mom.” Jackie doesn’t look up. “I won’t be long.”

Evie raises her hand and nods the way only grandmothers can, putting him at ease and letting him know his mom will be taken

care of while he's gone. Shane scans the room, taking note of the humps of laundry at the foot of the bed, and the dirty dishes that he will have to pick up and wash after the memorial.

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Scrubby trees and houses flash by the window of Uncle Pete's truck. Shane has seen it all a million times. Some days it feels like everything around him—Janice's store that sits like a fat blue bead on the main road, the familiar faces that nod hello as they pass by, the cracked siding of the band office, the bleached silver planks of the powwow grounds—all of it is part of his skin. The people, the buildings, the gravel, and the trees have all lived together for so long they are indistinguishable from one another. His heart beats under this ground and the roots of the trees spread through his lungs. He is his home. But today this place feels like a crappy video game with only one level, where he just keeps passing the same shrubs and beat-up houses over and over again in an endless, cheaply made loop. It's these dirt roads that wash out in spring, the mail that's always getting lost, the unreliable water system—all of it sparked his interest in urban planning and his drive to go to school. He loves going over new plans for parks, sewage systems, transit systems, anything designed to move people and organize their lives. It was inspiring to feel like the answers to the problems he's grown up with all seem to be out there, waiting for him.

Uncle Pete has been talking since they left his house. "How much longer you think she's gonna be like that?"

"I don't know. You're her brother—you tell me." Uncle Pete gives him some side-eye.

“Well, you seem to be doing okay. I don’t know why she can’t pull it together. My auntie lost one son to suicide, one daughter was murdered.” Shane glares through the window, trying to block Pete out. “She never once holed up like that. She just kept working. But your mom, always thought the world owed her something. When things don’t go her way, that’s it.”

“She just needs time,” says Shane, still looking out the window.

“Pfffft. She needs a smack is what she needs.”

Shane digs his nails into his palms and pushes his fist into the upholstery, forcing himself not to rise to his uncle’s bait. Pete chews on the ends of his wispy mustache and turns up the radio. The truck slows as they approach a stop sign. Shane quickly calculates the likelihood of Uncle Pete saying something to push him over the edge in the five minutes it’s going to take to get from here to the school. He decides not to chance it.

The truck stops, and Shane jumps out. He slams the door, and takes long strides down the dirt road without looking back. Pete’s truck follows at a crawl behind him.

Uncle Pete yells, “What—you gonna be pissed at me now?” The truck’s tires roll over the gravel with a soft crunch, like someone trying to walk quietly in the bush. “Look at you with your nose in the air, all in a huff. I can tell you were raised without a man around.”

Shane looks at Pete sharply. “You got that right.”

For a moment it looks like Pete might stop the truck and give Shane a pounding, but he guns the engine and takes off. Shane steps onto the shoulder to avoid the spray of gravel.