

Excerpt from Blood Mark

What if your lifelong curse is the only thing keeping you alive?

Jane Walker survives the back alleys of Vancouver, marked by a chain of blood-red birthmarks that snake around her body. During her tortured nights, she is gripped by agonizing nightmares when she sees into the past. It isn't until, one-by-one, the marks begin to disappear that she learns the deadly truth: Her marks are the only things keeping her alive.

1 | Jane

August 8

Jane Walker might have been the only person in Vancouver not afraid to be in a downtown alley at half-past midnight. Shadows clung to fissures and corners, morphing into nightmare shapes as she passed. A warm breeze stirred the scent of rotting garbage along with her gag reflex. Rescuing Sadie was getting old. One of these nights, Sadie's unique way of punishing herself would be the death of them both. And maybe Jane's bike.

She parked next to Ethan's Fat Boy in the hopes his reputation would spill over and protect her cherished Honda 500. But the caged bulb above the back door worried her. It bled a weak circle of light that pooled near the bikes. It was a toss-up whether it would draw attention or act as a deterrent. She said a prayer for the latter and removed her helmet. A slamming door punctuated a heated argument drifting down from a nearby apartment. She raked her long hair forward to hide the worst of the birthmark on her face then walked around the corner, bypassing the dregs of Riptide's nightly queue.

A bouncer she knew manned the door. His steady gaze slid sideways at her approach. Boos from the lineup he held at bay prompted him to inhale, emphasizing the girth of his chest. He flexed biceps larger than her thighs, tipped his chin, and let her pass.

She nodded her thanks and stepped inside. A cocktail of perfume and stale sweat assaulted her. Thumping music reverberated in her chest as she scanned the bar for Ethan Bryce and found him pouring shots. A seasoned bartender, he worked the room like a ringside bookie at an illegal fight, smiling with one eye and watching for trouble with the other.

“Thanks for calling,” Jane said, pressing into the bar. “Where is she?”

Ethan held her gaze a moment longer than necessary then swiped his head to the left. Jane followed his line of sight to the dance floor, where her roommate swayed out of step with the music. Sadie had gone with tasteful tonight, wearing her LBD, as she called her little black dress. Her client must have been a high roller—unlike the ’roided-up jockstrap now keeping Sadie upright with a hand on her ass and a sure-bet smile on his face.

Jane strode through the dancers and stopped short of her. “Sadie?” she shouted over the music.

Sadie lifted her head from Jockstrap’s shoulder and struggled to focus. “Narc?” She blew at a stray blonde curl. Jane winced at the nickname Sadie rarely used in public.

“You know her?” Jockstrap asked.

“Shurr. Tim, meet Narc. Dance with us.” Sadie reached for Jane. Her mascara had smudged, leaving charcoal shadows under her eyes. It’s what two lines of coke and a few too many vodka chasers looked like.

Jane took her hand. “Let’s go home.”

“She’s with me tonight, honey,” Jockstrap said, tugging Sadie’s arm away from Jane. He looked down to Sadie with a smarmy smile. “Aren’t you, baby?”

Sadie squinted up at him. When she looked back at Jane, sparks of awareness surfaced. She pushed against his chest. “I gotta go.”

“You don’t *gotta go*,” he said, dragging her back. “Stay with me, baby. We’re having fun, aren’t we?”

“How about I bring her back tomorrow?” Jane said. “When she’s not wasted.”

Sadie stumbled as Jockstrap twisted to put himself between the two women. “I’ve made an investment here.”

Charming, Jane thought, recoiling from his stale-beer spittle. She was quick in a fight and had the advantage of being sober, but Jockstrap had a hundred pounds on her and a hard-on with a destination.

She knew Ethan wouldn’t tolerate her pulling a knife in Riptide, so she’d have to dissuade Jockstrap some other way. She looked to the floor. For Sadie, she’d expose her marks. Only for Sadie. An eyeful of ugly often gave her a split-second advantage. He was already wobbling—shouldn’t be too hard to knock him on his ass.

She shifted the grip on her helmet, widened her stance, and drew in a calming breath. Then, in one swift motion, she swung the curtain of

hair away from her face. “She’s going home,” Jane said, pressing upward into Jockstrap’s personal space to ensure he got a good look at the thick blood-red birthmark that slashed an angle from her forehead to her temple. It looked like the work of a medieval battle-axe.

He shrunk back with a familiar snarl of revulsion. Already primed, Jane was ready to launch when a firm hand landed on her shoulder, halting her.

“Everything all right here?” Ethan asked, squeezing harder than he needed to. Jane felt a pinch of resentment at his interference.

Jockstrap’s gaze darted to the figure standing behind Jane. Ethan wasn’t big, but his reputation was. You didn’t cross him unless you had generous sick-leave benefits.

Jockstrap’s nostrils flared. He pinched his lips. Neither man moved. Long seconds later, Jockstrap faltered and blew out a deflating breath. His bravado and sure-bet attitude faded along with his hopes of getting laid. He released Sadie with a little shove. “Go on then,” he said. “Take out the trash.” He stalked away and called over his shoulder, “And it’s Tom, not fuckin’ Tim.”

“Yeah,” Jane mumbled, “not fuckin’ Tom, either.” With a shake of her head, Jane settled her hair back into place. She wrapped a steadying arm around Sadie’s shoulder and turned her around, bumping into Ethan, who stood in their path.

“You okay?” he said, but his expression was a warning. She’d forced his hand and he didn’t like that.

“Yeah. Watch my ride? I’ll come by in the morning to pick her up.”

“Jimmy’ll keep an eye on her,” Ethan said, before he swaggered back to the bar.

Ethan’s faith in the stubble-faced panhandler who hung around the bar was a mystery to Jane.

She opened Sadie’s purse and fished out her keys.

2 | Rick

Rick Atkins kept his back to the dance floor and gazed at Sadie’s reflection in the mirror behind the bar. Not that Sadie would recognize him in glasses and a full beard, but vigilance had served him well to this point. He wouldn’t tempt fate when he was so close to his endgame.

He watched the woman who called herself Jane flash her markings like a blowfish in the face of the predator shark who groped at Sadie. Jane

had no inkling of the damage she was capable of inflicting. But not for long. Rick downed his beer and slinked out the door.

3 | Jane

August 9

Jane parked in Sadie's spot behind the Victorian house she and Sadie called home. The Kitsilano mansion had dodged the wrecking ball of the sixties but not the callous renovations of the seventies that left its old bones mutilated.

The pungent aroma of pot lingered in the hallway. Their new neighbour no doubt—his was the only other apartment on the basement level. Jane hadn't yet met him.

They descended a couple of steps and made their way down the dimly lit hallway to their apartment, Jane keeping a grip on Sadie's arm. They shared a small one-bedroom unit. First one home in the evening got the bed. She slipped her key in the lock and gave the door a shove, comforted by the heft of the steel against her shoulder. A door the landlord would never have agreed to if he'd had to pay for it.

Sadie staggered in ahead of her. Jane turned the lock and shot the two bolt locks. Thieves would find the sparse apartment a waste of their efforts, but the locks weren't to dissuade thieves. Jane set her helmet on the floor and heeled off her boots, careful not to dislodge her boot knife.

She helped Sadie to bed and tucked her under the sheet. The mattress and box spring rested on the floor beside a table lamp that Sadie had rescued from a dumpster. She was already fast asleep when Jane returned with two aspirins and a glass of water. Jane set them on the parquet floor, also known as the bedside table.

Back in the living room, she double-checked the bolt locks. She'd gotten a deal on the door from a demolition warehouse but would have paid full price if she'd had to.

She changed into her sleep pants and an old cotton work shirt and settled on the sofa, drawing a quilt up under her arms. Though she was glad to have Sadie safe at home, she hated leaving her bike downtown, regardless of Ethan's faith in Jimmy.

Her thoughts drifted to Ethan. He was the only man Jane could remember whose gaze didn't skitter to the left of her face when he looked at her. It was as if he didn't see her birthmarks, or that one anyway.

Port wine stains, the doctors had called them, though they hadn't shared with her that they'd never seen specimens so uniform. Or extensive. The stains strapped her body. When Jane was ten years old, her guardian had allowed her to be stripped and photographed. That small humiliation still haunted Jane—so much so that only Sadie had seen all the hideous birthmarks. A handful of men had gotten a preview—men who'd fooled her with sweet words and then cut her to the quick when they didn't have the fortitude to accept all of her.

The skin beneath the stains hadn't thickened with age, as the doctors had predicted, but the stains themselves had morphed into an intricate pattern. It looked as if the birthmarks had been applied with a blood-red rubber stamp in thick rows.

The only treatment available to rid her of the crimson stains was laser, a painful and expensive procedure not covered by any health insurance she could afford. And because the birthmarks were vascular, the doctors warned her that the treatment might not work. It could even make the stains worse.

That didn't sway Jane from her plan to attempt the removal process as soon as she'd paid off her Rebel. It wouldn't be long now. She'd begin with the biggest offender: the two-inch-wide red line that tracked across the left side of her face, from mid-forehead to her ear. Hiding that one from curious stares was the most difficult. Two of the others, one on the back of her hand and one on the top of her foot, posed seasonal challenges but were nothing gloves and boots couldn't cover.

Jane rolled over and gave in to the sleep that tugged at her. With the door bolted, the dreams could come. Not that she could stop them. They came when they wanted, without warning or apology. Vivid dreams that she could recall in painstaking detail, even when she didn't want to.

And when the dreams came, nothing could wake her until they'd run their course.

Visiting Dream

Jane finds herself in a hospital room. The young woman in the room is pacing. She's been in Jane's dreams before. Her name is Rebecca Morrow. Jane read it on an envelope in an earlier dream. That time, Jane had been in Rebecca's tiny apartment, where Rebecca had been all smiles, snuggling with a man who had a rumbling laugh. Jane doesn't know her or the man, which is unusual.

This time, Rebecca's demeanour is furtive, guarded. Her hair is long and in need of washing. She wears two hospital gowns, one open in the back and, over it, one open in the front. Surgical socks cover her feet. She's folded her arms tightly across her chest, pulling her shoulders into a hunch. Her circuit takes her from the wire-mesh-reinforced window to the bed to the open door.

Jane doesn't know why she's here with Rebecca. She scans the room looking for clues. Only a hospital bed and a padded chair furnish the space. No personal belongings. No warmth. No sharp edges. Austere. Jane senses it's a psych ward.

A kindly woman, short in stature and wearing a bright, busy smock, pushes a cart of linens past the door. Her dark eyes are ringed in blue and set in a deeply lined leather face. She acknowledges Rebecca with a warm smile.

Sometimes hairstyles or clothing reveal the dream's vintage, but Jane sees nothing to which she can pin a year or a decade. No disco hair, no visible tats or piercings.

When a nurse appears at the doorway, Rebecca freezes in place.

The nurse sounds as if she's speaking through water, her words indiscernible. This is a change from the dreams Jane had as a teenager. Back then, the dreams were silent movies.

With a jingle of keys, the nurse unlocks a door opposite the bed. It's a bathroom. She ushers Rebecca inside and supervises her use of the facilities. The nurse then guides her to the bed and hands her a small paper cup. When Rebecca reaches for it, the sleeve of the hospital gown rides up her arm, exposing white gauze bandages. A suicide attempt? The nurse doesn't take her eyes off Rebecca until she's washed down the pills with a few sips of water.

Jane wants to leave, but she's stuck in the dream. It will release her when it wants to and no sooner. Jane breathes deeply, forcing herself to control the sense of helplessness these dreams bring on.

Rebecca drifts into a drugged sleep. She tosses her head from side to side and incoherent words tumble out.

Jane watches Rebecca sleep until her attention is drawn to the doorway. A doctor, if the white coat is any indication, approaches the bed. The man's hair is short and gelled. He's handsome. Tassels adorn his shoes, and his fine wool slacks have sharp creases. He studies Rebecca's face while she sleeps, adjusts her blanket, then touches her cheek with his fingertips.

Jane woke with a start. Her dreams always ended abruptly. At least this one hadn't left her retching. Or screaming. Jane checked the time. Two o'clock in the morning; four hours before she had to get up. She rarely had a second visiting dream in one night. Relieved to have it done with, she rolled over and bunched up the thin pillow.

She thought about the doctor's gesture as she drifted to sleep. It felt off—inappropriate. Jane wanted to believe the doctor's caress stopped at Rebecca's cheek, but she wasn't that naive anymore. Her dreams had seen to that. People carried out unthinkable deeds in her dreams when they thought no one was watching. Dreams Jane wished she could forget.