



Chapter One

My chin hits gravel; teeth on tongue.

The foot on my back is Jack Minnow's. He presses harder, enjoying the sight of a new believer forced to worship. I spit blood and dust from my lips and Mayor Longsight's bare foot is sprayed red. He leans down and whispers.

“Welcome home, Leora. I have so much to tell you.”

I spit again, this time aiming right for him.

The crowd – a respectful distance away from their leader – only see me bow. And they roar their approval – not joy at my return, but jubilation at Mayor Longsight standing above me, above them, ruling over his people. A man, made divinity.

I thought we were safe, I thought everything was new. I thought that Longsight was dead.

Jack Minnow's strong hands drag me to my feet, grasp my hair and hold my head rigid. He turns me to face the townspeople, who hush enough to listen. I stare out at the

crowd, at the people I thought were my friends. People I grew up with. My eyes searching for Gull. I can't see her.

“Here is your traitor.” Longsight’s voice is triumphant. “Here is the one who brought the enemy to our door and an assassin to our square.”

A horrible growl rises from the gathered herd of people. The mayor waits for it to ease. “But, friends, what she intended for evil, I have used for good. She planned my destruction, and yet, I wrought my resurrection. There is a higher purpose, and even the wicked plans of a traitor cannot halt true destiny. Do not be worried or afraid. I have conquered.”

I shake my head, regretting it immediately when I feel Minnow’s fingers tangle in my hair and the ache and sting of my injured mouth. Minnow releases my hair and grasps my arm, pulling me with him towards the dark doors of the government building.

“Time for us to talk,” Mayor Longsight says as he follows us inside.



Chapter Two

Mayor Longsight's study is not new to me. But this time, it feels different. The previous times he has always needed me, just a little. He needed me to go to Featherstone; I was the only one who would get away with being his spy. And he needed me again when he wanted to parade me as his puppet. Now I am afraid that he doesn't need me at all.

My stomach turns as the smells of the room swelter around me. Leather and sweat and unread books and polished wood. A metallic top note makes me think of weapons – of sharpened blades – but, when I wet my lips with my swollen tongue, I know it is just the smell of blood. I will get used to that.

I stand there, legs quivering. Jack Minnow's breath is on the back of my shoulder, but he doesn't hold me or attempt to keep me restrained – I pose no threat, not any more. I could try to run, but they would stop me before I reached the door. Besides, I'm tired of running – it never seems to get me anywhere.

There's a feline satisfaction about Mayor Longsight. He has wrapped himself in a burgundy robe and lounges on his chair, one leg crossed over the other, his elbow on the armrest, propping his chin on his hand. His smile is wide and his eyes blink slowly – as though he knows a secret that is hidden from mere mortals. He is alive. It is impossible, unbelievable and yet. . .

“Aren't you going to ask me my secret?” He raises an eyebrow, head cocked to one side as he examines me. “I mean, aren't you just a little bit impressed? It's not every day that someone returns to life.”

“I'm impressed by your gall.” I'm startled by how cool and steady my own voice sounds. I daren't let him know how shocked I am – that I am finding it next to impossible to process all I am seeing. “I'm impressed that you would play a game like this on such a scale. But then, you do love to trick your people. You weren't resurrected.” I summon a sour smile. “The only miracle here is that they believe you.”

“And you don't.” It's not a question, and his face sinks into thoughtful disappointment. After a while, he stands and steps around the table towards me. I catch glimpses of his beautiful skin as the robe shifts. It seems as though he is almost alight: he gleams darkly, like an ember. I feel that if I touched him my skin would burn. “I'm sorry you doubt me.” He stands close – close enough for me to feel

the warmth from his body. “But, look—” He shakes off the silken robe and stands with his arms spread wide, so I can see every scrap of ink, every outline of muscle. “You saw the blood. You watched the attack.”

I try not to think about it, I tell my memory not to replay that moment, but it’s too late and I see him, stabbed and on the ground, pooling blood. I see the cloaked figure of Sana, triumphant. She killed him. . . Or at least, I thought—

“You remember that morning, I can see it in your face. Look at me, Leora. Look at me now.”

The scar is impossible to miss.

A darker line in that tender space just below his ribs, a flash of pink too. Three fingers across. An angry, fierce wound. He should be dead. He was dead.

“How?” My voice is barely a breath. I stretch out a hand.

Longsight laughs, delighted.

Minnow stands close behind me. “You do not touch him,” he warns.

“Oh, come now, Jack,” Longsight says. “Let her touch – let her examine me. After all, it’s the only way she will believe; and you know how much I adore a new convert.” He looks at me, challenging me to say no – willing me to say yes.

Before I know what I’m doing, my hand is on his warm

skin. I kneel down to get a closer look, pressing close to the wound and looking up at Longsight to see if he will wince or turn away in pain, but he smiles down at me beatifically as though my interrogation is an act of worship.

It's only a scar, I tell myself. But this – this is the scar of a man who was slain.



Chapter Three

The fragile moment of my fingers on Mayor Longsight's skin is broken when someone raps sharply on the door. Longsight pulls on his robe as though he had simply been showing me some new ink, and Minnow goes to answer, speaking quietly. I stand, rubbing my knees where the carpet has left its plush fuzz on my trousers. The door closes and Minnow, like a dog, attacks, his hand at my throat, pinning me against the bookshelf.

“You brought a blank into Saintstone? How dare you desecrate this town?”

They have found Gull. Hot fear sweeps over me, fear that has nothing to do with Minnow. Gull will never survive the rage of Saintstone.

“Enough, Jack,” Longsight says sharply and Jack Minnow stills, chest rising and falling, his hot breath on my face. His hand does not move. The mayor steps close, as though examining the spoils brought by his hunt.

“A blank?” Longsight muses. “Oh, Leora, I thought

you were clever. Bringing a blank here just announces yourself as our enemy.”

I try to swallow but my throat is tight and sore against Minnow’s hand. I can’t speak to reply.

“You have polluted our purity. And you have done your friend no favours. Did you think they would be tolerated here? Still. . .” He looks at me thoughtfully. “She must be kept safe, away from the townspeople. For now. I will speak with her.”

Abruptly, Jack Minnow lets me go. I rub my throat. Mayor Longsight had me in his web already but now that he has Gull I am stuck fast. He chuckles and sits back down at his desk, barely concealing his delight as he watches my cheeks burn and my eyes spark with angry tears.

What does he hope to gain from me? What more can he want? He already has the people’s devotion – they loved him before, but now that he has cheated death, they adore him. He has all the power and prestige that anyone could ever need and still it isn’t enough.

His head is inclined as he considers my fate.

“I have plans for you, Leora Flint. We were counting on your return – expecting you: you always do come back. And now that you’re here I can really begin. . . But patience is key. There is no rush.” His gaze is thoughtful. I swallow and glance at Minnow – he doesn’t speak. Mayor Longsight examines me coolly and eventually sighs. “You

will be useful, extremely useful – in time. The question is, what to do with you for now?”

He tips his head at Minnow. “Send a messenger for Mel – tell her to be ready at the lower doors.”

Minnow goes out. “I want to see my mother,” I announce.

Mayor Longsight laughs.

“Nice try, Leora. Firstly, you don’t get to choose. And secondly, your mother won’t be coming. Even if we summoned her, she would refuse to see you.”

Words, just words, I think. Words designed to hurt and scare me. “I don’t believe that,” I say calmly while my heart races and my knees shake.

“You’re hardly popular in Saintstone, Leora. You are a traitor who brought blanks into our midst.”

“She doesn’t believe that. She knows me.”

“She knows terrible suffering because of you. She is despised and rejected because of you. A pariah in her own town. No wonder, then, that she denounced you. You’ve brought her nothing but trouble – at least leave her in peace, Leora.”

I am silent. Mum would never denounce me. She wouldn’t. I know that much.

He smiles gently. “It would be easier if you just accepted that you no longer have a mother. You will stay where I command.”

“I’m a prisoner?” I ask, and Longsight raises his eyebrows.

“A prisoner? Oh, that’s a bit crass. Let’s just stay that you will remain here as my guest. If you care about your blank friend, that is.”

My mind swims, as though I am shipwrecked and watching all the things I care about floating further away, sinking to the depths. Minnow returns, and gives Longsight a brief nod.

Longsight gives a languid smile as he stands and smooths down his robe. “Walk with me, Leora.”

Minnow holds me tightly, one hand at my shoulder, the other clasping my wrists. I had expected Mayor Longsight’s pace to be quick and purposeful, but he walks slowly down the corridors of the government building, nodding graciously to staff who back against the wooden-panelled walls and bow their heads. In contrast to his relaxed presence, Minnow seems bulky and awkward.

“I can’t tell you how good it feels to no longer fear death,” Longsight purrs as we walk.

“You believe you will live for ever?” I can’t keep the scorn from my voice. Longsight merely raises a shoulder as if to say, *just look at me*. “So . . . what did you do? How did you work this supposed miracle? Did you have to say magic words or go through rituals?” I sound dismissive, sarcastic, but really, I’m desperate to know what has happened, how

it is that he walks by my side when he should be flayed and made into a skin book.

“Ah, your curiosity has finally been piqued. I knew it wouldn’t be long. I’ll tell you what happened, gladly – I have no secrets from my people, and I would still like to believe that you are one of us, Leora. But first, a little background.” He is quiet for a minute while we walk past people in the passageway and all we hear are their hushed voices and our footsteps. We turn a corner and he resumes.

“It’s one thing knowing one’s destiny. It’s quite another to live it.” I think of all the times I have been told that I was born for this moment – that I am a symbol, a sign, a bridge. “I had only ever trusted Jack here with my deepest thoughts and, as good a listener as you are, Jack, I could see that the sceptic within you won every time.” He smiles. “I forgive you that, of course. It is not easy to accept change.”

He stops to look at a painting that is hung on the wall and Jack shuffles to a halt, pulling me back before I bump into the mayor. The painting shows Saint, our saviour, whose likeness is at the centre of our town. It shows him walking, back turned to the viewer, along a long path. The ground beneath his feet is as red as a carpet welcoming royalty. It is red with the blood that seeps from his body with every step – for, of course, he is walking home to Saintstone, away from the blanks whose wicked leader skinned him as punishment for bringing them his good

message of hope. The story I grew up with, the story I heard so often it was embedded in my bones.

I know a different story now.

“It’s a great story,” Mayor Longsight says as he gazes at the image. “The thing not many people ask, though, is ‘What happened next?’ What happened after Saint reached Saintstone?”

“Well, that’s because we know,” I reply. “He arrived back home, wrapped in his skin like a kingly robe, and he was welcomed as a hero. He is the reason our dead are flayed.” My voice is dangerously bored. Minnow’s fingers squeeze painfully on my wrists. A warning. But Longsight just gives a small smile – humouring me.

“I’m glad you’ve not forgotten. But that’s not what I mean. What happened after *that*?”

I shrug. “Don’t tell me – they made him mayor and he was just like you?” Longsight loves to proclaim himself as the new Saint and so, I fling all the hate I have into the word, *mayor*.

Longsight glances at Minnow and nods minutely and Jack twists his grip until the pain is so great that my knees give way.

“Don’t test my patience,” Longsight says, in a tone that is light and sweet, as though he is talking to a puppy. I get back to my feet, my eyes smarting with pain.

“I imagine he would have been a fine mayor, Leora,”

Longsight carries on. “But he never got the chance. He lived long enough to hear the people’s applause and to tell his tale . . . but then he died. We don’t tell that bit, because we all prefer a hero to a human.” Mayor Longsight sets off walking again. “It’s a useful storyteller’s device – if you leave someone alive at the end of your story, your listener doesn’t have to think about their death. It’s in good taste, but it’s not the whole truth.”

And he’s right, I think. Everyone in the stories lives happily ever after.

It makes me think of another story: before I knew I had another mum, I never longed for anyone else. It was only when I heard about Miranda and was told the tale of her life and of her death that I missed her, grieved her. Nothing new had happened – it had always been so – but I suddenly felt the heaviness of loss like it might pull me under. Nothing had changed, except my story.

“My story is different,” says Longsight. “My story does not end with a death – no, for my death was just a beginning. When the storytellers speak of me, they will never say ‘he was’ – only ‘he is.’”

“And you foresaw this?” I ask curiously. “You knew you were . . . *immortal?*”

“I knew there was something special about me, yes,” he says. “That I was different – as though my ancestors had set me aside for their own purposes. And the people

could feel it too – they said that I was Saint reborn, come for a new era of hope, power and change.”

People did speak of him that way, in his election campaign and beyond. I had felt the same. Dan Longsight gave us all a feeling that something better was coming. I loved him for it, once. I wish I could say that even then I saw through him, that my gut instinct had warned me to distrust him, but it would be a lie. I had been as taken in as everyone else. Well, almost everyone else – the crows weren’t fooled. Connor, Oscar and Obel, and the other rebels. Dad. Why hadn’t he told me?

“You tried to talk me out of it, didn’t you, Jack?” Longsight says. Minnow says nothing in response, and Longsight, smiling, carries on. “When I shared my plan with you – to lure Sana, to allow her to commit the act she had been desperate for for so long – I believe it left you shocked.” Minnow’s eyebrows raise momentarily, and I wonder how shocked he was. Hadn’t Sana said she and Jack had worked together? “I saw the doubt in your eyes: why invite your enemy to your quarters? Why make it so easy for them? Why choose death? But now you understand. I reached the high office of mayor because I am deliberate, clever, and because I have very little time for pity.”

“And because you’re special,” I say blandly.

“And because of that.” He smiles at me. “We knew that Sana would not be able to resist a public spectacle – we

fed information to the crows so that she knew when and where the public address would happen. It was too good for her to resist – a chance to catch us unawares, or so she thought. An opportunity not only to defeat the leader of her enemies, but to do it right in front of them.”

I almost – almost – feel sorry for Sana. She was tricked. The only question was how.

“The knife had blood on it when I found it in Featherstone,” I say.

“Of course it had blood on it,” Longsight retorts. “She embedded the blade into my body. It was not a trick. It was a real dagger, real blood, a real death. My heart stopped. Within minutes, the people knew the truth – their leader was dead. They even laid my body in state, allowing people, over the course of two days, to pay their respects. I was anointed with embalming oil, wrapped in blue cloth – ready for the flayer’s blade.”

I stare at him and grit my teeth. “But people don’t just come back from the dead,” I say.

“You’re right. People don’t.” And with that, Mayor Longsight turns and walks on. I glance at Jack and I think I catch him frowning – looking at Longsight, not as though he was Saint reborn or a miracle maker, but as though he were a fool. The look passes before I can process it and I am shoved forward, following Longsight once again.



Chapter Four

We walk on, down steps until we are below ground level. It smells different, as though the air is old. We must be quite deep underground by the time we reach a set of double wooden doors that suggest the start of a new wing – a part of the government building I have never seen before.

Mel, Saintstone’s storyteller, has been waiting for us. She nods respectfully to the mayor. Our eyes meet for a second and I feel it all over again – the electric pulse that comes from her, the way she fills a space just by existing. Her red curls are pinned up off her face, and her intricately inked skin reminds me of being read to as a child. Although she intimidates me, she is also the taste of home and with that comes a strange comfort.

“Your new charge,” Minnow says to Mel, gesturing to me with a flourish.

“She has not received ink?” Mel asks, her gaze sweeping over me – eyes lingering on my left arm. “Why

not? She is a criminal and should be marked as such.” I notice Longsight’s mouth tighten at being questioned but his voice is light when he replies.

“You fear I will not ensure justice is done? Believe me, storyteller, her punishment will come. For now, though, she is in your charge.”

Mel’s mouth opens but then she nods assent.

Longsight clasps her arm. “I’m counting on you, Mel. I value your faithfulness.”

Mayor Longsight and Minnow turn and walk back through the wooden doors. Mel looks after them for a moment. “You have at least been saved a trip to the jail.” She turns and looks at me, her eyes unreadable. “Punishment marks are done within earshot of the cells – it’s not a nice sound.”

“Is that where Obel is?” I glance towards the dark corridor that must head to the prison.

“If he’s still alive, then yes,” Mel says, and turns. I can only try to keep up with her brisk pace as she walks further into this underground warren of dark, dank corridors and forbidding closed doors.

Eventually we reach a passageway that is familiar, and I realize we’ve gone all the way under the town square and have ended up at Mel’s study, which is in the basement of the museum. I hadn’t realized there was underground access to these places and inwardly curse myself for not

paying more attention to the turns we took – maybe I would have been able to find a way out.

I look around her study, at the shelves of books and the worn woven rug. Her desk is messy with papers. This is where I came to be told my results – where I learned that I had been accepted as a trainee at Obel’s studio. I visited Mel here when I needed her help and advice, back when I thought she was my mentor and that she cared about me. The last time I was here Mel had a charge – a child called Isolda. I wonder where she is now.

Mel shows me around – points out a door to a small bathroom and another that leads into a tiny bedroom where she sleeps.

“You will sleep here.” She points to a mattress and some cushions in the corner. “You’ll be comfortable enough.”

There are no windows to hint at the time of day and so I try to gauge the hour while I arrange the cushions into somewhere I can sit. Time with Longsight always disorients me – talking with him could have taken hours or just minutes. I am tired from trudging through the forest with Gull, and it was dawn when we arrived in the town. *Oh, Gull.* I close my eyes and think of her, alone – perhaps in the jail. *Perhaps in the hospital,* a cruel voice whispers. *Or she may be dead.* No. Longsight promised that she would be safe for now. I cling to that thought.

The sound of paper on paper and Mel's sighs and the scratch of a pencil making notes lulls me to sleep.



I dream that it is night, and I hear someone call my name. I run, following the sound, but with each step I am no closer to the voice that is crying out for me to save them. Hands claw at my back and I try harder to run, but I can't evade them, can't wriggle free of their grasp. They are on me, and I turn to see my pursuers. Their skin is grey and peeling away to reveal tiny chinks of light – as though they are broken ceramic lanterns, hiding flames inside. Their fingers grasp and scratch at me like dead branches. I don't know whether to fight or give in; whether to peel away more of their skin to reveal the light or to snuff out their sparks. Where they touch me, my skin recedes into grey too. But I fear there will be no light within me.



My own cry wakes me. “You’re a noisy sleeper,” Mel says. She pulls a book closer to her on her desk.

I go to the small bathroom and wash my face. While I’m there I lift my top and check my skin. Ever since I was bitten by Fenn’s dog back in Featherstone, I’ve had lingering marks which seem to keep travelling lower. Sure

enough, the lines snake across my stomach now, a troubling image determined to appear. I try rubbing them away with a flannel and water, but I know it's useless – I know that like the crow on my chest they'll reveal themselves soon enough. These kinds of marks always do.

The study has a comforting smell. Mel's oiled skin gives up its scent of rose, tea and lavender; the books on the shelves and her desk almost breathe with how often they are opened and are allowed to lie with their faces up to the sky. I sit straighter and watch Mel work.

She is frowning over a skin book, her red curls messy and escaping from their pins. Not the normal kind of skin book, but the skin book of a storyteller. Storytellers have no stories of their own recorded – their books are made up of our community's sacred stories.

Mel must have taken this book from the secret shelves she once showed me. Up a set of steps at the back of the museum is a room you would not notice if you didn't know to look. Had she really trusted me back when she took me into that intimate, holy place? It feels like another world. The storytellers are not named and remembered by their families for their deeds and accomplishments like the rest of us. They have no names along their spines, no family trees or faces – only the imprint of the stories they recorded and recounted. Storytellers of the past huddle together skin to skin on the shelves in that hidden room.

They are unknown by most of the community, but for Mel, they are family and history and home.

We sit there for a time in silence, while she turns the pages and I doze. “Where are you?” she mutters to herself, and I watch as she draws the skin book closer and slowly leafs through its pages again, studying each one with a magnifying glass and a frown. “You must be here somewhere.”

I stretch and stand, and Mel looks up.

“Can I help?” I ask. I force a smile. “May as well make myself useful.”

Mel raises an eyebrow. “There is an art to this, you know.” Then she seems to unbend slightly.

“Which story is it?”

“Pull up a chair.” She moves hers slightly so there is space for two at her desk and I find a wooden seat – small and low, made for a child – and drag it over so I am sitting next to Mel looking with her at a storyteller’s skin book. I am surprised to see that the story she has been puzzling over is the tale of the Sleeping Princess – a story so familiar that we could probably all recite it before we started school.

“The marks are so different to yours,” I exclaim. “Aren’t you meant to keep the stories unchanged?” I look at Mel’s skin – full of colour. The sleeping princess is on her arm – a tangle of green thorns that reaches up to reveal a girl standing tall over a broken spindle. I see the

story of the lovers on her calf; they stand, sun and moon converging. The mark that shows Saint is partly hidden by her skirt, but I see him golden and glorious. Her marks are like ripe fruit, and yet the book on the table before us is black and grey – beautiful, *yes* – but it’s only when I really look closely at the skin book that I see any similarity between this illustration of the story and the work on Mel’s own skin. Mel gives a wry smile.

“These are the kinds of questions I love and yet rarely get to answer. Yes, the marks *have* changed over the years.” She passes a hand tenderly over the page in front of her. “If all the storytellers from every generation met together and recited one of our stories, our voices would be as one. The words would be almost identical – we have a strong and faithful history of passing on and speaking the stories perfectly. But when it comes to our marks, we are free to choose – so long as we reflect the stories accurately.”

“Why would you be given that freedom?” I ask. “It doesn’t sound like the kind of Saintstone I know.”

Mel shakes her head in amusement. “You’ve become cynical.” She sits back, and the tips of her fingers play along the lines of ink on her arm. “A storyteller’s job has never been just to get the words right.” I raise an eyebrow, but Mel doesn’t let me interrupt. “My role is not to simply tell the stories, but to enable the people to truly hear them. I look at the world we find ourselves in and I trust that

stories can help us make sense of it – my task is to help our community see how they fit into the stories. The ink on my skin is an interpretation of the stories – a way of telling them for us here now. Isn't that what all our creative pursuits do? Our attempts at art tell the same tales in new ways so that we can make sense of the world around us and the spirit within us.”

I lean forward. I feel like I am having lessons again. “What if a storyteller gets it wrong? What if their interpretation is false or they are trying to twist the stories to get what they want?”

“This is why we always go back to the beginning. Our skin books stand as a testimony to the generation we served, but every new storyteller starts in the same way – the same words, the same stories, the same fearsome and holy task.” She shrugs. “We just bring something different to it.”

“What do you think you have brought to the stories?” I am so curious to know.

She thinks for a while. “When I first began as storyteller I thought I was living in a golden age. There was so much passion and faith and a renewed love for obedience to the teachings of our ancestors.”

“You don't feel that way now?” I push for Mel to say more.

She sighs. “Now . . . now, I see our people more afraid than ever before – and yet at the same time, more sure of their

own righteousness. Perhaps it was always this way. Perhaps I was naïve, or too full of hope to see the cracks.”

I stare down at the book in front of her. “Why now?” I ask. “Why are you looking at these old books now?”

Mel stares down too.

“I keep wondering if I’ve missed something. Something crucial.” A furrow appears between her eyebrows. “Throughout our history, when something new or unusual happened, the storytellers have been able to look back at the skin books and see that it was predicted or that it was hidden in the stories all along. All of the major events in our history – the blank resettlement, for instance – have been predicted in some way. Just not. . .” She taps the table absently. “Just not this.”

My heart thumps. “And by *this*, you mean Mayor Longsight’s reincarnation?” I ask softly.

She looks perplexed, and my heart goes out to her, briefly. Mel has always believed so strongly in her faith. “There must be a precedent for this – his death and resurrection. It must be here somewhere, in these teachings.”

“But you can’t find it.” It’s a relief to hear someone else say it too, to have them voice their bewilderment about the mayor’s apparent miracle.

Her troubled eyes meet mine. “Not one story talks about a leader who could defy death in this way.”

“But the story of the lovers?” I ask. “His queen calls him back from the dead with her love.”

Mel smiles a tiny smile. “You always were a good student, Leora,” she concedes. “But no, his was a different resurrection – one that changed him. Remember that although the king was the sun, the story ends with him ruling the underworld – the land of the dead – and their son was the living ruler in his parents’ place.” She turns a page. “There is no precedent for what our mayor claims.” She shakes her head. “Our people will look to me to explain. They need me now, more than ever.” She lifts her eyes to mine once more, and where once I saw certainty, now I see only fear. “My training should have prepared me, but my hands are empty.”