



Spark

ALICE BROADWAY



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chapter 2

THE WORDING IN THE LETTER WAS POLITE: AN opportunity to discuss recent events. But really, I had been summoned.

While I waited outside his office, I took a moment to calm myself. I rested my hand on my chest, where my mentor, Obel, had inked the magnificent crow. I became a person with power that night, when I revealed my mark and spoke the names of the forgotten—and I knew that was why they wanted to see me. I was a threat: exactly what I wanted to be.

Not for the first time, I had no idea what would happen next. Mayor Longsight stood when I entered the room, which was

large and warm and hemmed in by full bookcases. He walked around his desk with his hand held out, and after a moment I shook it. To the side of the desk sat Mel, our town's storyteller. She didn't stand or speak, but her smile, in that unguarded second before it faded, said everything: She was pleased I was here. I wondered if she'd missed me. I shook my head to clear these thoughts—I needed to remember her betrayal, to be on guard.

Mayor Longsight gestured for me to sit, and it was a relief to have the big wooden desk between us—as ever, his marks were all on display, and I had never felt comfortable seeing all that skin. There was burgundy leather on the desk's surface, which was empty except for a gold fountain pen, an inkwell, and a pile of thick, plain paper.

He spoke first.

"I'm glad you agreed to meet with me, Miss Flint." *Like I had the choice.* "I think we ought to talk about your little stunt at the speaking of the names ceremony, don't you?"

Little stunt. As if I was a disobedient child. I felt the heat flare in my cheeks. Longsight settled back in his chair, watching and waiting for my reply. I closed my eyes and recalled the power I'd felt that night. Obel had reassured me: "You've done nothing wrong, girl. You've got them scared, that's all."

"We have discussed your actions at length, Leora," Mayor Longsight said, the hint of a sigh in his voice. "Mel has spoken for you in the strongest terms. She believes there is a great deal of good in you still." His eyes met mine and I dropped my gaze. His eyes: It always felt like they saw too deeply. "She told me she

thought you had perhaps been pushed too far.” I looked at Mel, wanting to hear her voice, but she just kept her eyes fixed on the ground, deferential in his presence.

I willed her to look at me, to connect with me again. I had felt so honored to be mentored by her; it had seemed as though she’d really seen me. And I had let myself open up.

I found my voice.

“You used me.” I was speaking to both of them, but looking at Longsight. “You manipulated me: fed me only enough information for me to be your puppet.” I saw it again: the hall of judgment, the rows of friends and family, the shadows flickering on the walls, and me just standing there, watching Jack Minnow fling Dad’s book into the flames. How cleverly they let me do their work for them. Denouncing my own flesh and blood. Turning my back on the man who raised me. I only realized when it was too late.

“Is that really how you see it?” He leaned forward, elbows on the desk. “I saw it another way. I saw a girl of blank heritage, who had no idea where she came from. It was our duty to tell you of your true parentage, especially as the woman who called herself your mother would not. And not only did we let you discover your full history, but we offered you a place in our society—a chance to serve our community, which would protect you from the judgment of other, less open-minded, citizens. Because we knew that not everyone would be so accepting of your . . . blankness.”

My *blankness*. There, he’d said it. It had been hidden from me for so long that it still felt new and ill-fitting, like a boot I needed to break in. The woman I believed was my mother is not. My birth

mother was a blank, and I have her blood in my veins; she exists in my cells and makes me *not quite*. I'm marked, yes, but my heart is half blank. I'm blank but I'm covered in ink. I'm not quite either, not quite anything. And in Saintstone there is little that could be more dangerous.

And Longsight was right. No one had been willing to tell me the truth—not Mom, not Obel, not Verity's parents, Julia and Simon. Even Oscar, the boy I thought I had fallen for, knew more about my life than I did. I haven't seen him since he gave me the remnant of my father's skin—the piece he saved from being burned in the fire. We hurt each other, lost one another's trust. He's not in my life, but he's rarely out of my thoughts.

Longsight alone had given me knowledge. And now I didn't know what to do with it.

He interrupted my thoughts. "I can only imagine what was going through your mind—the things that made you feel you should mark yourself in such a way." His eyes flicked to my neck, where the top of the crow Obel inked on me flutters out. "It seems to me that we expected too much of you."

He didn't know. He didn't know that my body gave me the crow before any ink was spilled. That the dreams I had of the crow gradually began to take shape on my flesh. That purple and pink marks had swirled from my chest like magic, until I was sure of their message. That I had gone myself to Obel and asked him to consecrate that message in ink.

I would not let them make me afraid.

"We made mistakes, Leora, when it came to you. I know that

now.” He stared at his hands. “Mel is passionate, and so is Jack Minnow. But with that passion comes . . . well, let’s just say that sometimes passion can blind us.” Mel shifted in her seat, and I sensed her discomfort. Why did she say nothing? Mel is her voice—she has authority because of the stories she tells, which are the key to everything we believe and do in Saintstone, and yet here she was, meek and silent. I didn’t like it. I didn’t trust it. “They deeply regret that they might have hurt you.” I flinched; it was such an obvious lie. I couldn’t imagine Minnow ever regretting pain he had inflicted.

“We’re not *baddies*, Leora.” He gave me a wry smile. “This isn’t a fairy tale. They—*we*—believed that you could help bring even greater peace and stability to our community. Who else is like you? At once both blank and marked: one of us—one of the faithful, in spite of your rebel blood.” I shook my head, and Longsight leaned forward. “Oh, Leora, don’t waste this. The thought of a marked man lying with a blank—” He shuddered. “And yet, from that distorted union something good has come. You represent possibility, hope—a blank who has turned to the true path. Now, I know what Mel would say: She would have you as some kind of emblem for peace—a uniting of Moriah and her sister, the White Witch. I am not so naive.” He looked at Mel, whose face was impassive. “There is no middle way. I find myself in a disagreeable position. The resettlement bill worked well, for a time. We two communities lived separately, peaceably. An uneasy truce, I grant you, but a truce nonetheless. But those blanks have pushed and pushed my patience, overstepping and disregarding the generous

terms of our agreement. I cannot stand back and allow my people to be burned and robbed and humiliated by the blanks. There is no value in a treaty that is only respected by one side. They won't listen to reason. The blanks must and will be destroyed; I know that now. Your people need you."

I felt it then: the horrible weight of all I had done. I had turned my back on my community, on my chance to work and grow and be happy, the way I always thought I would. All I ever wanted was to be an inker, to learn and study.

"I had no choice," I tried to explain, and I wondered whether that was true. "Or, at least, my options were limited. Either I worked for you, or I was an outcast, forgotten." I lifted my chin. "And if that was my choice, then I would be an outcast."

"That was never your only option." Longsight smiled sadly, as though I was an errant child.

But, a little voice whispered, if I'm just a silly child, then why do they still care so much?

I shook my scruffy hair out of my face and looked at him dead-on. "Are the blanks really such a threat?" I asked.

There was a pause, and despite the heat of the room, I felt my arms prickle with goose bumps. "A greater threat than you know, Leora," he said softly at last.

I swallowed.

"What is it you actually want?"

He sighed. "What I *want*, Leora, is for this community to be at peace and for the people I lead and love to be certain of their safety." *Does he love us?* I wondered. *Or does he just love what he*

can make us do? “One girl’s small spark of rebellion can soon become a blaze: Because of your impulsive act, a whole community is left doubting what they have always known to be true. You are a blank who could be marked. Your father was forgotten—and yet you forced us to remember. You have sown seeds of mistrust. What I want is for you to mend this rift, not deepen it. And for that we need you. Oh yes—” He saw me open my mouth to speak and raised his voice. “It *has* to be you. People are watching to see your next move. I want you to stand by your community and help your friends and family by showing loyalty to your leaders, by repenting of your rebellious and individualistic act and allowing us to be one again as we stand for our values and our unity. And I know exactly how you can show your repentance.”

Guilt came so much more easily than anger. Despite myself, I felt the weight on my shoulders. The shock waves I had sent through my little world, my friends and family.

Studying my face, Mayor Longsight continued:

“I want you to go to Featherstone.”

His words made no sense.

“To Featherstone.” My voice sounded strange to myself. “Wh-why would I go there?”

“You would go there because my patience is at an end. Because my long-suffering tolerance of the blanks—in the face of violence and disruption—is worn thin. And now I will destroy them, and for that I need you.” He smiled a slow smile. “You will live among the blanks. You will see for yourself what they really are. You will tell me what they are planning. And when the time comes, and they

truly accept you as their own, you will turn against them. We know some things about the blanks, and we suspect many others. What I fear is that they are more dangerous than we realized. That Jack Minnow is right, and that by allowing them to live, we have left ourselves open to a terrible attack. That we may have to fight them sooner rather than later. The people here do not want that war; they have grown used to peace." His smile was magnanimous, but there was steel behind it. "What I need is evidence—something that will rally our people, a cause we can be united in fighting. Believe me, Leora—I *have* been patient; if Jack Minnow had his way we would have already smoked them out, like the vermin they are."

My voice, when it came, was little more than a croak. "Do I have a choice?" I whispered. "You are asking me to destroy them."

To my surprise, it was Mel who spoke.

"You do have a choice, my dear." She took a breath, and it was as though she reclaimed her space, her beautifully expansive frame fully filling her form. "And, as your leaders, so do we." Longsight sat back and sighed, but allowed her to continue with a wave of his hand.

Her voice was like cello music—sorrow and hope swimming together. "Leora, you know by now that you are special." My face was set in a frown—I knew nothing of the sort—but she kept on smiling, and as before, I saw love in that smile. Faith. "Not just because of your unique position as both blank and marked, but because of your courage." Her tiny nod as she spoke reminded me of how her words gave me life when she was my mentor. I knew I must shield my heart. "You have zeal and spirit like no one else I

have ever met. That is why your misstep hurt so much—we scared you, we pushed too hard, and I take full responsibility for your act of blasphemy at the speaking of the names.”

I closed my eyes. Was it victory, not apostasy? In calling out the names of the forgotten and including them with the worthy, I took on the role of judge. I spoke for our ancestors, for our leaders, for our community.

“There are ways of undoing the past.” Her voice was low and shadowy. She must have known that her words were as heretical as my actions, and yet she dared to say them in front of Longsight. “As things stand, you have committed crime enough for us to denounce you, for the community to call for your judgment. You know the price for that.” I shuddered as I remembered Connor Drew, Oscar’s dad, inked with the mark of a crow in front of a crowd in the square. Marked as forgotten. My whole universe shifted that day.

“But there is more mercy in Saintstone than you seem to realize.” She looked up at Longsight, who raised an eyebrow, and she stood. “There is a way to make all of this right. And *you* are the only person who can do it. You, our new Moriah.”

I gasped; I couldn’t help myself. Even if Longsight didn’t, was it possible she knew my marks came from within, just like Moriah’s—the beautiful sister in the stories? She stepped closer so I could see the ink that wrapped her body. She is our holy book. Her voice and her skin tell our community’s stories: our history. She lives and breathes our beliefs.

“For this rift to be healed, we need a bridge.” She was close enough for me to smell the perfumed oil she is given to keep her

skin soft and beautiful. “The blanks hold many secrets, and we need to know them. We know they steal from us. We know that lately they have done worse. We know they are trying to weaken us and are biding their time, waiting to attack. But we don’t know when.” Her eyes were soft with compassion. “We don’t yet know how to bring about peace.”

At this, I lifted my eyes up first to Mel’s face and then toward Longsight, whose mouth twitched at the mention of peace. He looked impatient—ravenous, I thought.

Mel continued.

“I dream of a time when blank and marked can once again become one. To do that, we must have compassion, Leora.” I stared at her. I didn’t know where this was going. I heard Longsight sigh. “They have stolen our stories. They take them and bastardize each one, turning them to poison, addling the minds of all who hear them. The blanks, as we call them, are not evil, not all. For the most part they are deceived. They need to return to the path of righteousness. They need to hear the truth.”

I saw then that Mel was all faith. She believed in the truth and she believed that it could save us all.

I looked to Mayor Longsight, who looked deeply uncomfortable. If Mel wasn’t so important to our community and our way of life, I suspected he would have shut her down by now. I wondered: *What motivates him?* Behind that mask of compassion, he is driven by strategy. Does he care about our stories, or does he want to crush the blanks once and for all?

Am I a bridge, or a weapon?