



Ink

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SCHOLASTIC

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chapter 2

THE MORNING AFTER WE OPEN DAD'S BOOK, MOM goes back to work. She says that it is time, that we need to go back to our normal lives, or, at least, work out what our new normal is going to be. *Normal* is very important to Mom; she's always been effortlessly popular, sociable and busy, committed to the community, and I think she's always been a bit bewildered that her own daughter is such a loner. I decide to get out of the house too, but head to the market; there is no school today; my year are all on study leave. I know I have to engage with all that again, with revision and final exams. I will have to

work hard to make up for the time I've missed if I am to be an inker—which is all I've ever wanted.

I walk along the sidewalk, rippled by tree roots beneath, and I wonder when we'll get a date for Dad's weighing of the soul ceremony. The most time-consuming part has already happened in this last month since Dad died: the flaying, the tanning, the binding of his skin into a book. Now the people at the government need to study his finished book and prepare his case before the ceremony can happen. And then he can come home. Back with us, where he belongs.

The weighing of the soul ceremony is where the leaders announce their final decision about the destiny of your soul. They will have studied Dad's book and judged whether he has led a worthy enough life. The worthy go home with their family, are placed among their ancestors, and are read and remembered forever. Their soul is safe in the afterlife. If you're found unworthy, your soul is destroyed in flames along with your book. I've never seen it happen, but they say you never forget the smell of a burning skin book. That won't be Dad, though; no one could have led a better or purer life.

Closer to town the road narrows, until the sidewalk is just wide enough for one person. Walking down the dusty street, I sneak looks into the windows of the terraced homes I pass. The higgledy buildings are each painted different colors and face right onto the sidewalk. When I was little I used to tell myself stories about the streets like this; I used to imagine a giant had squeezed the row of houses, making each one skinny and

creating wobbly roofs of different heights. Now, I tell myself different stories as I peep into the leaded windows and wonder about the lives within. When people don't close their curtains, I take it as an invitation to guess at who lives there and what their life is like. I am so engrossed in looking that I almost bump into a man picking the dead petals from the red geraniums in his window box. I step around him quickly, one foot in the road, inhaling the sharp bitterness of the dying flowers.

I keep walking, and, in my mind, I turn the pages of Dad's book. I feel my shoulders relax. It was a beautiful relief to see him last night. Mom seemed like a different person when we left the museum; she sighed so loudly when we reached the final page I thought at first that something was wrong, but when I turned to look she was smiling. She was right to: His skin tells such a good tale. When someone reads your book, they should be able to read your life story; they can weigh the good against the bad and know if you're worthy. Everything important goes on our skin, because otherwise it stays in our soul, and no one wants their soul weighed down, either by pride at their good deeds or by guilt at their transgressions. We mark our bodies to keep our souls unfettered. Only the worthy attain remembrance, and to do that your good must outweigh your bad and your soul must be free.

I smile at the thought of Dad's pure soul ready to be counted worthy. I am longing for the day of his weighing to come.

Dad was a flayer—his friends at work will have been the ones to slice his skin to make it ready for the tanners. He did the

same for their loved ones and for the countless unknown people who came their way each day. Mom is a reader; it's more of a calling than a job, I suppose, but it does pay—not everyone considers that a real job. It's hard to explain what makes someone a reader, but the best way is that some of us can read the meanings behind marks—we can see beyond the immediate message to what the ink expresses about that person's heart. My mom can look at your family tree and tell who is the favorite child. She can look at the age marks on your hand and tell which year almost broke you. She can look at the marks that describe your qualifications and tell whether you cheated. People admire readers, but they also fear them. Mom once told me that everyone has secrets they want to keep.

We shouldn't really have secrets, though. That's the whole point.

I have the gift too. I've been able to read people since I was a child. Mom says she worked it out when I got into trouble in my first week at school; I had asked a boy why he didn't live with his real dad. When his angry mom showed up at the door demanding to know who had been gossiping about them, Mom knew I must have read between the lines on the boy's skin. But just because I can do it doesn't mean I want to do it as my job. I love the glimpse it gives me into people's marks and lives, but sometimes I get tired of ink shouting out the inner world of strangers as they pass by. I don't think I could bear their anxious faces if they were sitting across the reading table from me, knowing that if their marks chose to reveal the truth, I could see everything.

No, my dream is to be an inker. All I can hope is that I do well enough in my exams, which aren't looking as straightforward as they once were. I've missed so much time with Dad not being well. I've always gotten good grades at school without having to try too hard, so being anxious is a first for me.

As I near the center of town, the houses turn into rows of shops. I pass the bakery, a florist, and the leather worker's place, where we get our shoes and bags mended. The dusty path becomes cobbles and the narrow street I'm on takes me to the town square. In the middle of the large square is a small comfort-blanket of green, standing out bright against the stone and timber of the buildings surrounding it. And at its center is the statue of Saint, the most important leader in our history.

He stands in the middle of our bustling town, a tall figure in bronze: smooth, robed, and watching us. I've always loved his story—the tale we tell to remind us of his faithfulness, the power of stories, and the soul-freeing necessity of flaying the dead. And, of course, he stands there as a warning to us about the despicable ways of the blanks. Footpaths cross the square, corner to corner, and people stroll along them chatting and trying to find a patch of grass between the footpaths where they can sit and drink their coffee.

The square is where you can really get a sense of what matters in Saintstone. And if things matter here, they matter everywhere. All the towns around depend on us: Saintstone is where the government is based and where all the decisions of any importance are made. I like living in the center of things. I'm not sure how it

would feel to be in one of the smaller towns where everyone thinks they know you even before they've seen your ink.

Depending on which way the wind is blowing, you can usually smell the smoke from the hall of judgment. It's a large circular building made of stone and colored glass that tapers up to the wide chimney. The fire is always lit, the smoke creating permanent gray-brown clouds over the town. It's where the soul ceremonies happen and where Mom and I go when it's our turn to speak the names of the dead. It's also where matters of faith are taught and upheld. Our schoolteachers train there; our spiritual education and formation is just as important as our academic attainment.

On this side of the square, behind me as I walk, is the museum—my favorite place. It's raised high, with stone steps all around it. It towers over us, all stone pillars and arched windows. It looks dark and imposing from here but when you go inside it's bright and cozy. Dad used to take me there all the time. I swallow, feeling a sudden chill in the shadow of the building, and hurry on.

Across the square, beyond the grass and trees and benches, I see an unexpected bustle and commotion. People are setting up loudspeakers on a temporary platform that has been constructed outside the government building, which is a giant L-shaped box taking up two sides of the square. People are gathering round, some are getting up from their benches to get a closer look, and there is a low hum of conversation. There must be a meeting I've forgotten about.

Seeing the government building makes me realize I've not been called for my truth-telling test in a while; I should expect it soon, I suppose. We're meant to have one every few years to allow us to confess. The image of Dad taking me for the first time, when I was nearly fourteen, flashes brightly in my mind.

Dad had assured me it was nothing to worry about, but that hadn't stopped me from being scared. We'd all been told about the machine that reads your pulse and temperature and beeps if you're lying, but I'd never seen it. My imagination had convinced me it was definitely going to hurt. I was certain that this would be the moment that I would be found out; I thought of all the little lies I'd told my parents and times I had snuck an extra cookie when I'd been told I'd had enough. I even had nightmares about accidentally confessing to a crime I hadn't committed.

It was an anticlimax when we were shown from the main reception and led into a small, completely plain room with white walls, two chairs, a wooden table, and a small contraption that was nothing more than a dull and battered-looking metal dome with a light attached and wires coming out of it. A man with a notebook was waiting and gestured for me to sit down, but when Dad saw how nervous I still was, he asked if he could go first. He sat in the chair, placed his left hand on the dome, and looked at me with a smile and a roll of his eyes that said, "This is a breeze."

He answered all the questions calmly and the machine did nothing. I was relieved that the questions weren't too hard, just general queries asking about new marks and a list of crimes Dad