

FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION

AL STONE



ARCADIA

TALISMAN OF EL

**TALISMAN
OF
EL**

BOOK ONE
ARCADIA SAGA

TALISMAN
OF
EL

AL STONE



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*For my mother, Pauline, the first to hear the story.
Thank you for all your wonderfully weird tales.*

PROLOGUE

Manhattan, New York
January 25, 2013, 11:15 P.M.

DERKEIN ODESSA SAUNTERED INTO a study lined with bookshelves and a high ceiling of gold leaf and bas-relief sculptures. He stopped when he saw his father standing behind the large mahogany desk at the back of the room, rifling through the wall safe. A muscle in his jaw ticked. 'You're alive then,' he said.

'Not now, Derkein.' His father closed the safe, concealing it with a portrait of his wife.

Folding his arms across his chest, Derkein advanced on him, his footsteps echoing off the hardwood floor. 'Not now.' He chuckled without humour. 'Well, why don't you give me your card and I'll book an appointment?'

'I'm sorry I didn't call, but I can't talk right now. I have a flight to catch.'

When his father turned around, Derkein stopped, his eyes widening. A blood-soaked plaster covered the right side of his father's neck, red stains on the collar of his white shirt. Derkein hurried over to him. 'What happened?' he asked.

'I'm fine. It's just a scratch.'

'You don't look fine. Where have you been ...?' Derkein paused, the strong smell of tobacco assailing his nose. He scrutinised his father – the purple bags under his eyes, scratch marks on his chin. 'You're still searching for it, aren't you?' He sighed, raking a hand through his shoulder-length black hair as he lifted his head back. 'You gave me your word.'

'I know you disagree with my decision, but you have to understand –'

'Understand what? Dad, this is not normal.' Derkein grabbed the bag at his father's feet, lifted it onto the desk, and tipped it onto its side, scattering the contents over the surface. Surveying a collection of guns and daggers, he picked up a black leather sheath and pulled out a knife, its broad, stainless blade honed until the cutting edge was almost invisible. He dropped the knife and sheath among the other weapons. 'You have to stop this.'

'Luther's dead.'

Derkein's heart skipped a beat. 'What ... What happened?'

'Natural causes. Apparently, his heart gave out.'

'What do you mean "apparently"?''

With a hesitant glance at Derkein, his father opened the front pocket of his bag and pulled out a

burnished copper talisman with an engraved steel band and a circular crevice. 'Luther and I dug this up in the Roncador Mountains in Mato Grosso, Brazil. The earthquake that hit South America two months ago ... We caused it when we removed this from the earth.' He looked down at the talisman and then back at Derkein, distress clouding his features. 'The moment the earthquake struck, we passed out. Two hours later, we woke up on Manhattan Bridge.'

'I don't understand what you're saying.'

'We didn't fly to New York.'

'Then how did you get here?'

His father started packing the weapons back inside the bag. 'I don't know. Three weeks ago, Luther called me and told me that someone was following him. I think whoever was after him wanted the talisman, and when they didn't find it, they killed him. Now they're after me.'

'So give it to them. Dad, this isn't worth your life.'

'I can't. This is my only connection to Arcadia.'

'Where are you going?'

'England,' his father replied. 'Thomas might be able to help me. If what he told me about these beings is true, I can't be around you. They got to Luther. I won't lose you too.' He turned around and stared at the portrait covering the safe.

'I miss Mum too, but it's been five years. Give up before you end up killing yourself. Arcadia doesn't exist.'

His father looked at him. 'It's out there. I'm going to find it. I will bring her back.'

‘Mum’s dead,’ Derkein snapped. ‘When are you going to get that?’

‘I have to go,’ his father said in a calm voice. ‘I’ll call you when I get there.’

‘Dad –’

‘I’ll be fine. I always am.’

‘Dad, please –’

An ear-piercing scream ripped through the building. Derkein froze, his eyes the only things that moved. His gaze fixed on his father, who was rummaging through his bag. He took out a black pistol and turned to Derkein, a tortured expression on his face as he placed the weapon in his son’s trembling hand.

‘Shoot anything that moves,’ his father instructed. He placed the talisman around Derkein’s neck, tucking it inside his shirt. ‘Don’t let it out of your sight.’ Cupping Derkein’s face in his hands, he made him meet his gaze. ‘I’m so sorry I got you involved in this.’ He grabbed another gun from the bag.

‘What exactly have you got yourself into, Dad?’

His father looked at him with a solemn expression. ‘If anything happens to me, you find Thomas. Tell him ... Tell him he was right.’ He headed towards the door.

‘Dad, wait.’ Derkein went after him. ‘Dad –’

The double doors burst open with a bang.

His father opened fire. ‘Derkein, shoot!’ he yelled.

Derkein glanced around the room in panic and confusion. He saw no one but his father. Then he felt a sharp pain in his arm, heard his shirt tear, and cried

out. Something warm dribbled down his arm, and when he placed his hand on it, he saw blood. His father screamed, and he looked up and saw him flying across the room, crashing into a bookshelf that collapsed under him.

'Dad!' Derkein sprinted towards him but felt a powerful blow across his chest that sent him flying backwards, and he landed hard on the floor, his gun falling out of his hand. Staggering to his feet, he glanced around for whatever had attacked him but saw nothing. His gaze landed on his father, who was groaning ... and then he was gone. There were no bright lights or loud noise. He had just vanished.

As Derkein stared wide-eyed at the spot where his father had been lying only moments before, something like a blast of electricity stunned him, and he felt an intense burning inside his chest. He let out a cry as his body lifted off the ground and hung in midair. Seconds later, he came crashing down ...

CHAPTER ONE

Substitute

THREE THOUSAND MILES AWAY, Charlie Blake jolted awake. He clutched at his chest as he tried to catch his breath. His heart was racing, his body trembling. He looked up at the bearded, heavy-set man standing over him, and it was then he realised he was on the floor.

‘It’s all right,’ said his guardian, Jacob Willoughby, as he helped Charlie onto the bed. ‘I’m going to call the doctor.’

‘No,’ Charlie protested. ‘I’m okay.’

‘Are you sure?’

Charlie nodded.

‘I’ll get you some water,’ Jacob said, and he left

the room.

Running a hand through his unkempt black hair, Charlie pulled it back from his face and looked at the clock hanging on the cream wall above the walnut chest of drawers opposite him. It had just gone three thirty in the morning. Taking hold of the chain around his neck, he looked down at the two silver rings attached to it, clenching his fist around them. A feeling of despair overwhelmed him, and he took a deep breath. He'd had nightmares before, but only once had he woken up feeling this way. That was four years ago – the day before his tenth birthday. The day before his dad died.

Jacob returned to the room. 'Here you go,' he said, handing Charlie a glass of water.

'Thanks.' Charlie took a sip and rested the glass on his bedside table.

Jacob stood with his arms crossed, his paunch hanging over his belt, his short brown hair damp, as if he had just stepped out of the shower. 'Feeling better?'

Charlie nodded, forcing a smile. It had only been a week since he'd moved into the three-bed cottage, yet he was already waking the man up at the most inconvenient time. If he was planning on this adoption succeeding, he was going about it the wrong way. 'Sorry I woke you.'

'You don't need to apologise.' Jacob's face assumed an amiable expression. 'Do you need me to get you anything?'

'No, I'm fine.'

‘If you do need anything, I’m right across the hallway.’ Jacob smiled and left the room, closing the door behind him.

Charlie waited until the light under the door vanished before getting up and splashing the glass of water on his face. He opened the window, which overlooked the back garden and the vast stretch of woods that lay beyond the fence, and cold air poured into the room, carrying with it a rich, wet, earthy scent.

Daylight came sooner than expected. The sun shone with brilliance through the wafting curtains. Charlie was sitting in bed, rifling through a black box with metal embellishments – a tenth birthday gift from his mother. Inside the box, he kept letters his mother had written to him before she died.

He shivered, his pyjamas like ice against his skin, but he didn’t mind the cold; it had a way of calming his nerves. Hearing footsteps on the stairs, he looked up at the wall clock above the chest of drawers, nestled between two pictures – a bucket of daffodils and swans in a lake. It was almost eight – four hours since the nightmare – and he hadn’t slept a wink. Replacing the letters inside the box, he got up and walked over to the walnut chest of drawers, set the box on top of it, and then headed across the room.

He opened the door and paused, glancing back to survey the small room, as he had done every morning

since he arrived at Spring Drive. A tingle of anticipation rippled through him as he thought about how far away he was from Alpha Children's Home. His gaze shifted to the TV and game console beside the chest of drawers, and he smiled.

As soon as Charlie entered the bright yellow farmhouse kitchen, the flagstone floor cold under his bare feet, the smell of bacon grease hit him, and his stomach turned. As always, neither the windows nor the door to the back garden were open.

A shrill whistle filled the air, and he glanced to his left at the kettle on the range cooker behind the oak table where he spotted Jacob sitting down reading the *West Sussex Gazette*.

'Hi,' Charlie greeted him.

'Morning,' Jacob replied. His gaze shifted to the kettle, and he set the newspaper down on the table, got up, and went over to the cooker. 'How are you feeling?'

'Good,' Charlie said as he approached the chair in front of him. Sitting down, he grabbed a saucer from the stack in the centre of the table and two slices of toast from the rack.

Jacob returned to his seat with a steaming cup of coffee. 'You look tired. Did you get any sleep?'

Charlie paused in the middle of buttering his toast. 'Yep.'

Jacob's beady brown eyes studied him a moment. 'Marz mentioned that you have trouble sleeping.'

Oh great, Charlie thought. He thinks I'm disturbed.

'Are these nightmares regular?' Jacob asked.

Here we go again. ‘No. Just your average nightmare. Who doesn’t have them, right? It’s no big deal.’ Charlie clenched his jaw and looked down at his plate.

‘All that city noise, I bet. Maybe you just needed a change of scenery.’ Jacob took a bite of his bacon sandwich. ‘I thought we had a break-in with all that screaming last night. Gave me a right fright, you did. That must have been a terrifying dream you were having. What was it about?’

Charlie looked at him, apprehensive. ‘I ... uh ... I can’t remember.’ His weary voice broke at the end.

A speculative look came into Jacob’s eyes, and his lips parted, as if he was about to say something; instead, he took another bite of his sandwich. ‘Are you looking forward to school on Monday?’

‘I guess so.’

‘Well, you have nothing to worry about. The kids here are great. Besides, Oakwood is a lot smaller than your last school, so you’ll make friends in no time.’ Jacob gave Charlie an encouraging smile.

Charlie bit into his cold toast and leaned back against the hard chair. According to Oakwood’s website, the total enrolment was exactly four hundred and seventy-five – about one-third of the total population of his last school – who most likely knew everything about one another. Being the new kid was a certified way of attracting attention, but being an outsider *and* an orphan, well, he’d be a headliner.

Charlie felt a swirling sensation inside his chest as he pondered that thought. Tasting something sour in his mouth, he set the toast down on the saucer. ‘Is

Oakwood really the only secondary school in Capeton?’ he asked.

Jacob nodded. ‘It’s a small town, but that’s why I moved here. It’s quiet. People respect your privacy. You’ll settle in soon enough. Just think of it this way. You’ll have all your friends under one roof. Just promise me you won’t throw any house parties while I’m at work.’

Charlie smiled and took a deep breath, relaxing a little.

‘Speaking of which,’ Jacob went on. ‘I have to pop into work this morning. You don’t mind having the house to yourself for a few hours, do you?’ Charlie shook his head. ‘Good. I have a wake I need to organise.’

‘A wake?’

‘Yes. It’s a gathering of family and friends, a way of showing respect for the deceased.’

So that’s what you call it, Charlie thought. When he had attended his dad’s wake, he had thought it had been a surprise party for him, believing that his dad had played a terrible trick on him. It had taken him over a year to accept that his dad wasn’t coming back. ‘Did you have a wake for your wife?’

Jacob’s shoulders stiffened. ‘I did,’ he answered, his voice choked.

‘What was she like?’

Jacob looked at his watch. ‘You know, I should get going. I have so much to do. You have my work number.’ He got up and rushed out of the kitchen far faster than he looked capable of moving. Charlie

heard him say goodbye, but the door slammed before he could respond. He hadn't given much thought to it before, but he realised then that he and Jacob had a shared understanding: neither of them liked to talk about their loved ones because it was as if they no longer existed. He was surprised Jacob hadn't quit his job as a funeral director, considering he had to deal with death all the time.

Charlie paced back and forth across the road from Spring Drive, a twisting dirt lane bordered by a stone wall and trees on either side. Perhaps it was the thick maroon blazer and black coat he had on, or that he wouldn't keep still, but even in the biting January air, he felt a bead of sweat trickle down the back of his neck.

Hearing a low rumbling noise, he stopped pacing and turned around. When he saw the yellow single-decker bus approaching, his heart skipped a beat. High at the top of the flat-faced vehicle were the words **SCHOOL BUS** in bold black lettering.

The bus pulled up in front of him, and the folding door opened. Behind the wheel sat a frighteningly gaunt black man. Charlie took a deep breath and entered.

'Noo 'ere's a new face,' the driver said in a strong Northern accent. 'W's yer name, son?'

'Charlie,' he replied.

'Great ter 'ave yeh on board, Charlie. The name's

Ernie. Grab yerself a seat.'

Charlie glanced around the half-full bus and then hurried along the aisle, keeping his head down. Finding an empty seat halfway down the bus, he settled into it. Two girls in front of him looked back and giggled. He felt his cheeks heat up when one of the girls chanted, 'Carla likes the new boy.'

The bus rumbled along a deserted country lane lined on both sides by a low barbed-wire fence protecting large fields. Hearing a noise, Charlie averted his gaze from the window and observed the two tall boys who had just walked past him from the back of the bus. They stopped three rows ahead of him where a smaller lad sat slumped in his seat. The larger of the two boys sat in the seat behind the small lad and startled him with a whack on the back.

'Wake up, Sunshine,' the boy standing up said – the leader most likely from the way his friend was watching him with admiration. He had broad shoulders and glossy slicked-back black hair, a stark contrast to his pale skin. He grabbed the lad's bag and opened it.

'Give it back,' the lad murmured, his cry reduced to a mere whisper out of fear.

Charlie looked towards Ernie, who, singing along to the radio, seemed to be in a world of his own.

The leader pulled a book out of the lad's bag. 'You want it?' he teased. He raised and dropped his eyebrows at his sidekick, a dark-skinned boy with a shaved head, who got up and opened the window. The leader glanced towards the front of the bus at Ernie,

who was still oblivious to the scene behind him, and then back at the lad. 'Go get it.' He tossed the book out the window.

Charlie clenched his fists and sat forward. Knowing how foolish it would be to march up to the leader and his giant sidekick, however, he sank back in his seat.

'That's my homework,' the lad cried.

'Someone's getting detention,' the leader taunted. The lad made a move, but the sidekick forced him back into his seat.

'STOP!'

All the students froze.

Charlie was standing in the aisle, his fists clenched.

The leader dropped the bag and turned to him. 'You got a problem?'

Charlie didn't respond. He hadn't thought that far ahead.

'Yeh kids behave back the'er,' Ernie called, gazing through the rear-view mirror. The bus slowed as it neared the next stop.

'Oi, you deaf? I said have you got a problem?' the leader repeated, his voice fierce. He stepped forward, narrowing the distance between him and Charlie, who stood his ground, though he didn't have much choice, for there was nowhere to run.

'Could you be any more predictable, Josh?' a brave voice said.

To Charlie's relief, the bullies turned away from him. His eyes rested on a girl about four inches

shorter than him at 5'2", wearing baggy trousers and black Converse shoes, and were it not for her long brunette hair that covered most of her olive-toned face, he might have thought she was a boy. She gave the leader, Josh, a hard look.

'Funny how bullies only pick on those who won't fight back,' the girl went on. 'Makes you wonder who the real coward is.' Her mouth twitched as she suppressed a smile. Then her eyes fixed on Charlie.

Feeling sweat gathering beneath his clenched fists, Charlie relaxed his fingers. As he stared into the girl's big cinnamon-brown eyes, framed by thick lashes, he half smiled, which quickly faded when he heard the leader's voice.

'I don't fight girls,' the boy named Josh said. 'If that *is* what you are.'

'I'll pretend I'm a boy if you pretend you are,' the girl shot back. Some students laughed, but when the bullies glared at them, they fell silent. Charlie sat back down while Josh's sidekick retreated to the back of the bus.

Josh's jaw tightened as he glared at the girl. 'This ain't over.' He backed off, frowning.

Charlie stared at the girl, who was helping the small boy pack his books back into his bag. When she finished, she walked towards the back, stopped next to Charlie, and leaned over him. Gazing into her eyes, he felt his heart leap.

'Don't worry,' she said with a smile. 'He's a lot less scary than he looks.'

Charlie's eyes followed her as she sat one seat

behind him on the opposite side, listening to her pocket-sized music player. When she lifted her head and met his gaze, he looked away quickly, heat rising to his cheeks again.

Twenty minutes later, the bus turned down a narrow, tree-lined road signposted Oakwood Secondary School. Charlie observed the medieval-looking building ahead that looked more like a library than a school, but when the bus veered left into the car park, giving him a wider view of the complex, he noticed the modern red brick buildings neighbouring the entrance building.

As soon as the bus stopped, Charlie made a quick exit, for the bullies kept giving him the evil eye – a sign of unfinished business, no doubt. He moved along the side of the bus, heading around the crowd that had gathered outside the entrance. To avoid scrutiny, he kept his head down as he made his way inside the building. He managed to find the office, a small cream room just right of the entrance, and collected his class schedule and school map.

Arriving two minutes late for his first and least favourite lesson, maths, he found himself the centre of attention, but apart from the prolonged discomfort of having to stand at the front of the classroom while the overzealous Mr. Springer added his name to the register, he got through it.

His next class, French, he spent with his head ducked behind his book, avoiding Mrs. Gregg, who had an annoying trait of picking the least enthusiastic person to answer questions. All he gained from that

class was an aching neck.

When the bell rang, he waited for the room to empty before heading to lunch. Chattering teens had already filled most of the tables by the time he entered the canteen. His heart drummed as he searched the large orange room for a place to sit, his tray consisting of a veggie burger, an iced sponge cake and a cup of orange juice.

Spotting an empty table in the corner lined with windows and a double door that led to the playground, he headed towards it. As he neared the table, he felt a thud against his back that sent him plummeting forward. His tray slipped out of his hand and flipped over, the entire contents scattering over the floor.

Shocked gasps echoed around the room, and everyone – even the dinner ladies – stopped what they were doing to watch.

Charlie scrambled to his feet and came face to face with the bullies from the bus.

Josh sneered. ‘Clumsy, aren’t you?’

Charlie’s pulse quickened, and a warm sensation shot through his body. Feeling a tremor beneath his feet, he paused. For a moment, he wondered if he had imagined the ground shaking, but then Josh’s expression changed; confusion replaced the amusement on his face as he glanced down.

‘*Calm down,*’ a voice in Charlie’s head said. It wasn’t the first time he was hearing the voice, so it didn’t alarm him. What puzzled him was the fact that it was a female voice. It always made him feel as if he

had two minds.

‘What’s going on here?’ a rasping voice barked.

Charlie glanced at a stout woman holding a mop and a bucket, wearing a blue and white striped apron and a white hairnet. She stood with one hand on her hip, a stern look on her face.

‘Who fancies a trip to the principal’s office?’ the woman asked. ‘If you think you’re going to fight –’

‘No one’s fighting,’ Josh said. ‘New kid here just had a fall.’ He shot Charlie a cold look.

Feeling everyone’s eyes on him, Charlie turned and made haste towards the double doors. People stared as he went by. Whispers followed.

Relieved to be away from curious eyes, he stormed across the playground and sat on a bench under a large chestnut tree, resting his head in his hands. He had planned to keep a low profile but had somehow managed to grab the attention of the entire student body on his first day.

‘Are you all right?’

The hairs on the back of Charlie’s neck bristled. He recognised the voice as belonging to the girl from the bus; the girl who had stood up to the bullies. He turned his head away, not wanting her to see the humiliation on his face.

‘Those guys are pricks,’ the girl said.

Charlie heard the bench squeak but didn’t turn around.

‘Yeah, my parents tell me not to talk to strangers too,’ the girl went on in a casual tone, ‘which, by the way, makes no sense. I mean, one minute they tell you

to make new friends and then they tell you not to talk to strangers. But before someone becomes your friend, they're a stranger, so how does that work? It's an oxymoron, if you ask me.'

Charlie turned around and saw the girl sitting a few inches away from him.

'I'm Alex, by the way,' she said.

Charlie gulped. He wanted to say something, but his mind was blank.

'You're a silent one,' Alex acknowledged. 'I'll let you off for today, but you'll have to speak to me at some point.' She smiled. 'The first day can be stressful, especially if the first people you run into are Josh and his goon.' She held out two clenched fists. 'Pick a hand.'

Charlie glanced at her outstretched hands and then looked back at her face, puzzled.

'Okay, I'll choose.' Alex looked at both fists, her expression pensive, and then lowered her left hand. Opening her right fist, she revealed a circular sweet in a shiny golden wrapper. 'It's chocolate with a marshmallow centre – Chocomallow.' She gestured for Charlie to take it. 'It's not poisoned, I promise.' When he didn't take it, she rolled her eyes and placed the sweet in his hand. She then opened her other fist and revealed a matching sweet.

Charlie smiled. 'Thanks.'

Alex gasped. 'He does speak!'

A weird fluttering feeling churned in the pit of Charlie's stomach. 'I'm Charlie.'

'I know. We're in the same French class. Welcome

to Oakwood.’ Alex relaxed back on the bench. ‘Was it just me or did you feel a tremor in the canteen?’

‘Yeah, I felt it.’

‘You know, the last time an earthquake hit West Sussex was in 1970.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Well, they have this thing called the internet.’

Charlie chuckled. ‘I think I’ve heard of it.’

Alex’s cheeks flushed, and she looked away. ‘There’s nothing to do here but surf the net. It’s dead boring.’

Charlie spotted the bullies coming out of the canteen. They pointed at him and laughed.

‘Idiots,’ Alex spat. ‘They’ll soon find someone else to pick on. It’s their hobby.’

‘I think they’re afraid of you.’

‘Nah, they just hate that a girl stands up to them and they can’t do anything about it. The chatterbox is Josh Hartley. The other dimwit is Damzel Brittle. You wouldn’t guess they were fourteen from the looks of them, would you?’

Charlie raised his eyebrows.

‘I know,’ Alex said. ‘It’s obvious they’re scientific experiments.’

Charlie laughed. He had assumed the boys weren’t his age, for he hadn’t seen them in any of his classes. And they were giants. With two lessons to go, he hoped he didn’t cross paths with them for the rest of the day – or the year.

‘Josh is the one you have to worry about,’ Alex went on. ‘Damzel just follows him around like a lost

dinosaur.’

‘What’s Josh’s problem?’

‘Where do I start?’ Alex’s expression turned serious. ‘To be honest, he wasn’t always this annoying. His dad died last year, and he became ... well, you’ve seen what he’s like.’

‘How did his dad die?’

‘He had a brain tumour. I do feel sorry for Josh. I don’t know what I’d do if either of my parents died. Still, he doesn’t have to be such an arse.’

Charlie looked across the playground at Josh. Although he felt angry towards the bully for humiliating him, he also felt sorry for the boy who had lost his father.

Alex asked, ‘You all right?’

Charlie looked back at her and nodded.

‘So where’re you from?’ she enquired.

He hesitated before answering. ‘London.’ It was the truth; he just didn’t like talking about his life, especially his past.

‘I’ve been there a few times, but that was years ago. We have family in Cornwall, so we’re always going there. London’s a big place – well, anywhere’s big compared to Capeton.’

‘Capeton seems quite big.’

Alex raised her eyebrows. ‘The entire student body can fit inside my house. There are six thousand people living here. Compared to London that’s – we’re not even a dot on the map.’ She pulled her legs up onto the bench and crossed them. ‘Have you been on the London Eye?’

'I've been on it a few times,' he replied.

'Bet it was amazing. I've always wanted to go on it, but lucky me, I have not one but *two* parents who are afraid of heights, so I doubt I'll be going on it anytime soon.'

'Can't you go with someone else?'

Alex shook her head. 'They won't let me go on it, period. I've been asking since I was, like, ten. You'd think after four years I'd be closer to getting a yes.'

'They might change their minds.'

Alex furrowed her brow. 'You haven't met my parents. They're convinced that if I went on it, the capsule – only the one I'm in, by the way – would disengage from the wheel and I'll plunge to my death.'

Charlie looked at her in shock. 'Wow.'

'Yep,' Alex said. 'My mum even had illustrations.'

'And you still want to go on it?'

'Did I mention it was dead boring here?'

Charlie smiled. 'Well, if they ever change their minds and I'm still around, I'll go with you – I mean, if you want.'

Surprise crossed Alex's face. 'You would do that?'

'Yeah. You did save me from a black eye, so I kind of owe you.'

Alex smiled, but then her expression became curious. 'Wait, why wouldn't you be around?'

Charlie swallowed and looked away. 'I move around a lot.'

'Lucky you. I've been stuck here forever.'

Charlie turned to her. 'Trust me, you're the lucky one.' Before she could ask any more questions, he held

his hand out to her. ‘So is it a deal?’

Alex grinned and placed her hand in his. ‘Deal.’

CHAPTER TWO

L

The Good, the Bad and the Weird

CHARLIE RAN HIS FINGERS over a picture of his parents embracing each other, smiling at him. They were wearing the same rings on their fingers as he had on around his neck. He was sitting on the floor, leaning against his bed. ‘Okay, so I almost got into a fight today – but I didn’t. That’s no fighting and no expulsion, so I kinda had a good day. Actually, it would have been worse if it hadn’t been for this girl I met. Her name’s Alex –’

A low hissing noise, like the sound of a water sprinkler, cut him off, and he looked at the door. Closing the photo album, he slid it under the bed and got up. He walked across the room and opened the

door. At once, he recognised the sound of voices. He glanced at the clock; 10:30 p.m. Curious, he headed downstairs, the sound growing louder with each step he took.

Standing in the hallway, his eyes darting around as he tried to locate the sound, he spotted Jacob on the living room sofa. His guardian seemed unperturbed by the noise, and for a moment, Charlie wondered if the voices were coming from the TV. But the two noises were distinct.

Heading down the hallway, he felt a strange sensation course through his body that caught him off guard, and he stopped in the kitchen doorway. The feeling was electric.

Charlie's gaze fixed on the cupboard under the stairs. There was no question now as to where the noise was coming from. His hands started to shake. The sound behind the door disturbed him, but he couldn't turn away from it. Holding his breath, he yanked the door open.

Silence.

Flicking the light switch on, he saw a pile of boxes.

'What are you doing?'

Charlie glanced over his shoulder at Jacob, who was standing in the living room doorway. 'Didn't you hear it?'

Jacob's eyes shifted left and right and then back at Charlie. 'Hear what?'

'The voices ...' Charlie trailed off when he noticed a peculiar look in Jacob's eyes.

‘Are you feeling okay?’

Charlie turned back to the cupboard and closed the door. ‘I thought I heard something,’ he explained as he headed back towards the stairs. ‘I guess it was nothing. ‘Night.’

‘Night,’ Jacob called to him, a note of worry in his voice.

Charlie entered his bedroom and closed the door behind him, bracing his back against it. He scratched his head as he tried to make sense of what had just happened. He knew he wasn’t crazy, but no matter how hard he racked his brain, he couldn’t come up with an explanation for the mysterious noise.

The sound of footsteps on the stairs interrupted his thoughts, and he switched the light off. Hearing a creaking noise behind him, he turned around and saw a shadow step into the shaft of light under the door. He kept quiet, listening to Jacob’s ragged breathing. He didn’t want to talk; talking only got him into trouble.

After a pause that seemed like forever, he heard Jacob’s footsteps retreating. Then the light under the door vanished. Charlie turned around, walked across the room, and climbed into bed. He was exhausted from the lack of sleep he’d had the past few weeks – having to adjust to a new life and because of the nightmares that haunted him. With each passing minute, his mind flickered like a kaleidoscope. Visions of long ago invaded his dream.

Charlie was back in Palmers Green, a quiet up-and-coming suburb in the restless city of London

where he lived with his dad. From his bedroom window, he gazed out at the dazzling summer sun rising above the rooftops of the Victorian terraced houses. He caught sight of his reflection in the window, his grey eyes glistening with excitement. Looking down at his black suit and tie, confusion crossed his face.

A shadow passed over him, and he glanced up at the dark clouds gathering over the horizon. ‘Hoot,’ a familiar voice called, and he ran out of the room.

As he scrambled down the stairs, he stopped halfway and looked up at the two pictures of his mum on the stairway wall. Retreating two steps, he kissed one of the pictures and then continued on his way. At the bottom of the stairs, he paused, engulfed by a warm, sweet smell. Following the scent, he drifted down the narrow hallway and entered a small kitchen. Seeing the pots and dishes scattered across the granite worktop, he shook his head and smiled.

‘Happy Birthday!’ His dad appeared behind him, holding a large chocolate cake. He was wearing jeans and a tight t-shirt, revealing his muscular biceps. With his tousled dirty-blond hair and scruffy beard, he looked more like a rock star than a dentist. He walked over to the table, set the cake down, and then turned around and bent down in front of Charlie.

‘Hoot. Today is a big day.’ His dad’s voice broke. He cleared his throat and started again. ‘Ten years. Time flies. I’m so proud of you. I know your mum would be too.’ They looked up at the picture on the fridge door of his mum at a beach in a floral dress, her

thick black curls falling over her shoulders. ‘Now, I know you have the whole day to stuff your face, but please, go easy on the sweets, okay.’

Charlie gazed into his deep-set blue eyes and hugged him. ‘I love you, Dad.’

‘I love you too, Hoot.’ His dad stood up and clapped his hands together, a big grin spreading across his face. ‘Guess what? I have a surprise for you.’

At that point, Charlie was aware in some part of his consciousness that he was dreaming, and panic set in. ‘We have to go.’

‘Go? Don’t be silly. It’s your big day. It’s going to be great.’

‘No.’ Tears welled in Charlie’s eyes. He grabbed his dad’s hand and dragged him out of the kitchen. ‘We have to go before it’s too late.’ His dad smiled as he pulled him with effort along the hallway.

As they reached the living room, loud cheers of ‘Surprise!’ erupted through the open doorway.

Charlie stopped, dropped his dad’s hand, and turned to the crowd of people standing in the living room, smiling at him. Most of them were children. His dad and the guests started singing “Happy Birthday”.

This isn’t right, Charlie thought. ‘What are they doing here? They’re not supposed to be here. Not yet.’ His eyes shifted to the clock on the lilac wall behind the crowd, and he watched in amazement as the hands spun with hastening speed from ten to three o’clock. ‘No. Not again.’ As he made a move towards his dad, he felt the ground shake, and he stopped. He noticed

everyone was still smiling. Hadn't they felt the tremor?

He heard a loud bang, as if something had exploded, and the whole house shook. Charlie looked at the clock again and saw the hands spin from three to six o'clock before it tumbled to the floor and smashed. Rushing to the front door, he opened it, and a strong wind seized him, as if to drag him outside. He grabbed onto the doorframe, staring in horror at the houses ripping apart. He slammed the door shut and braced himself against it.

The party guests had vanished.

'It's here.' Charlie ran over to his dad and embraced him. 'I won't let it take you.' Pressing his face against the fabric of his dad's clothes, he inhaled the wintergreen scent. At that moment, everything seemed to stop. And then the house trembled.

'We have to go.' Charlie tried to move, but his legs wouldn't budge; it was as if his feet were bound to the floor. He locked eyes with his dad. 'Don't leave me.'

'I'll never leave you,' his dad said as he caressed Charlie's cheek, wiping away his tears. 'It's okay to be afraid. Just don't give up. Don't you dare give up. Promise me that.'

Charlie didn't respond straight away. He didn't want to say the words because of what it meant: *make a promise, keep a promise*. The first words his dad had taught him as soon as he could talk. He shook his head as if to clear his thoughts. He could never lie to his dad. He was all he had. Staring into his dad's tear-filled eyes, he said, 'I promise.'

He heard a sound like a crushing can and looked

up. Huge cracks appeared and widened across the hallway wall, tearing through the floral charcoal wallpaper. He dug his fingers into his dad, grabbing hold of his clothes. Within seconds, the roof and the front walls of the house ripped off. Dust and debris permeated the air as a huge tornado funnel hovered outside the house.

‘Dad,’ Charlie cried.

‘It’s all right, son,’ his dad said. ‘Everything is going to be okay.’

His dad started to drift away.

‘Dad.’ Charlie grabbed his hands, holding on to him so tight his fingers started to go numb.

‘I love you, Hoot,’ his dad yelled. The wind gusts picked up, and he started to slip out of Charlie’s grip. ‘You’re not alone. Don’t give up.’

‘Dad, don’t let go.’ The tighter Charlie held on, the sweatier his hands grew, the looser his grip became. Then his dad slipped away.

‘Dad.’ Charlie watched as he vanished into the vortex of the tornado –

A loud racket shocked Charlie out of his dream, and he jerked upright. He threw the quilt off himself and swung his legs out of bed. Wrapping his arms around his trembling body, he felt his pyjamas damp with sweat. He took his pyjama top off and began wiping his face in it when a cold breeze brushed against his bare torso. It wasn’t until he heard a flapping sound that he looked at the window and saw the curtains fluttering.

A chill that had nothing to do with the cold ran

down his spine. He was almost certain he hadn't opened the window. He got up and was about to close the window when a movement outside caught his eye.

It had always amazed him how well his eyes could adjust to the dark. It was his night vision that had earned him the nickname "Hoot". 'My own private owl,' his dad used to say.

Inching forward, he peered out into the garden, and his heart stopped.

A tall figure was standing on top of the shed.

Charlie stumbled backwards, falling onto the floor. Staggering to his feet, he rushed out of the room and dashed across the landing to Jacob's bedroom. When he opened the door and turned the light on, he froze.

The bed was empty.

'Earth to Charlie,' said Alex.

Charlie looked at her, her eyebrows raised in anticipation. 'Sorry, what?' he asked.

Alex rolled her eyes. 'You really know how to make a girl feel wanted, don't you?'

They were standing by the lockers in the hallway. It had been a week since Charlie had seen the figure on the garden shed. He hadn't said a word to Jacob about it, nor had he confronted him about where he had run off to in the middle of the night. He had accepted that Jacob's job meant he was on call twenty-four hours a day, but what concerned him was that

Jacob still hadn't mentioned anything about being absent that night.

Charlie's gaze shifted to Carla Shu and Rebecca James, the two girls he had sat behind on the school bus on his first day, who were walking towards him. Carla waved, and he smiled, nodding his head in greeting. The girls stopped a few lockers away from where he and Alex were standing.

'All I'm saying is that he's just a little too creepy for my liking,' Alex said as she rifled through her locker. 'Maybe Killjoy's hiding something.'

'Who's Killjoy?' Charlie asked.

Alex's nostrils flared, and she breathed a heavy sigh. 'Seriously, have you been ignoring me the whole day? I'm talking about Jacob.'

Charlie eyed her with curiosity. 'Why do you call him Killjoy?'

Alex hesitated a second and then said, 'You'll laugh.'

'Tell me. I promise I won't laugh.'

Alex glanced around the hallway and then looked back at him. 'Okay, but you promised.'

Charlie held his hands up, crossing his middle and index fingers.

'Two years ago, on Halloween,' Alex went on, 'some friends and I knocked on his door, and he chased us away with a frying pan.'

'He chased you with a frying pan?' Charlie pressed his lips together to keep from laughing.

Alex slapped him across the arm. 'It's the truth. See, if I had a mobile phone, I could have had proof.'

But I can't have a phone.'

'Why not?'

'My mum's a technophobe – a total anti-technology freak. I'm not talking about being eco-friendly either. I wish that were the case. She hates technology because she thinks it's the devil's means of controlling us. You ever read "Nineteen Eighty-Four" by George Orwell?'

Charlie shook his head.

'It's like her bible,' Alex said. 'If it weren't for my dad, I swear I'd be living in a jungle. I'd be Mrs. Mowgli.'

Charlie started to laugh but stopped when he realised she was being serious.

Carla and Rebecca approached them. 'Hi, Charlie,' Carla greeted him.

Charlie stood up straight. 'Hey.' He avoided Rebecca's gaze. He didn't mind Carla's company, but Rebecca always had this look in her eyes, as if she was angry with him, and he didn't know why. 'What's up?'

Rebecca nudged Carla, who handed Charlie a blue envelope with his name written in glitter on the front.

Charlie opened the envelope and saw an invitation card to Carla's fifteenth birthday party.

'I hope you can make it,' Carla said, her cheeks flushed. She narrowed her eyes at Alex and then turned and walked off.

'Well, that now leaves me and – nope, just me who's not invited,' Alex muttered.

Charlie saw the hurt look on her face. 'I bet if you apologised for hitting her she'd invite you.'

‘I told you, the locker broke. It wasn’t my fault the door rebounded. Besides, I already apologised.’

‘Did you mean it?’

‘Does it matter?’ Alex slammed her locker door shut, and then she and Charlie headed off. ‘The only reason she didn’t invite me is because she thinks we’re ...’ Alex broke off and glanced sideways at Charlie. ‘I don’t care. I don’t want to go to her stupid party anyway.’

When they entered the science lab, the room was buzzing with conversation. They walked past Mr. Puttman, who was staring at a blank TV screen, slapping the remote control against his palm, his glasses sitting askew on his long, crooked nose. He tapped the screen and scratched his balding head, grunting in frustration.

As Charlie headed down the aisle behind Alex, he spotted Josh, who looked at him with contempt.

Alex nudged Charlie in the ribs and whispered, ‘He loves you really.’

‘Shut up,’ he murmured as they sat at a black top table with a wooden frame two rows behind Josh. Sensing someone’s gaze on him, Charlie glanced at the table across the aisle and locked eyes with Carla, who swiftly looked away and dropped her head, her shoulder-length brown hair falling to conceal her face. His eyes met Rebecca’s for a brief moment, long enough to leave him feeling uncomfortable by her frustrated expression.

‘So what are you going to do about Killjoy?’ Alex asked.

Charlie looked at her. 'Nothing. So he hates Halloween. Big deal.'

'Bet that was what Patricia thought.'

Charlie paused. Patricia was Jacob's late wife. 'Did you know her – Patricia, I mean?'

'Not really. I saw her in town a few times. She seemed nice enough.'

'Jacob said she died three years ago. Do you know what she died of?'

Alex looked surprised. 'You're kidding, right?'

'He doesn't like to talk about her.'

A strange look came into Alex's eyes, and she looked away.

'What?' Charlie asked. 'Alex, what is it?'

Alex looked back at him. 'She broke her neck, Charlie.'

He stared at her in shock.

'She fell down the stairs,' Alex said. 'He was there when it happened. They said it was an accident, but ...' Her eyes were intense. 'Just ... be careful.'

'Why? Wait, you don't think he –'

'I didn't say he did it,' Alex cut in.

'You didn't have to. It's obvious what you were thinking.'

'Oh, yeah, because you're psychic, right. Look, just forget I said anything. I'm just babbling. You know me.' Alex half smiled and leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table.

Charlie looked away. He tried not to show it, but Alex's revelation had unnerved him.

Ms. Trent, Charlie's social worker, arrived at Spring Drive at two in the afternoon. She was a stick-thin woman who always wore the strangest selection of hats. Today, she was wearing a peacock feather hat, which Charlie considered an improvement to the plastic fruits she'd had on the last time they had met.

Ms. Trent had spent the past hour in Jacob's company, and it didn't seem as though she was in any hurry to see Charlie. He lay on his bed, listening to the raucous laughter emanating from the living room. It was the first time he had heard her laugh; the woman hardly ever smiled.

When Jacob finally called him down, Charlie found his social worker sitting in the armchair by the original stone wall, the fireplace crackling beside her. She had her shoes off, holding a miniature mirror up to her face. When she noticed him, she blushed and lowered the mirror.

'Charlie, how lovely to see you,' she said.

'Yeah, you too,' he said, sitting in the sofa opposite her. The living room was his least favourite area in the house. It was like entering a time machine that transported him from the present to some distant past only his grandparents could have recalled. Amid the antique furniture, the Skybox was the only object that belonged in the twenty-first century. The moss-green walls held only one object: a black-and-white photo of Jacob's mother, who had an uncanny likeness to Marilyn Monroe. All Charlie knew about

her was that she died of cancer when Jacob was thirteen. Jacob had also told him that he had never met his father. It was no wonder he didn't like to talk about family.

Apart from Ms. Trent, there had been no visitors to the house in the four weeks Charlie had been living there. With the nearest house over three hundred yards away, however, it wasn't surprising. The more time Charlie spent with Jacob, the more he realised why the adoption agency had paired them together. They were the same: two lonely souls in a big world.

Jacob entered the room, carrying a tray with three mugs. Charlie noticed the glow on Ms. Trent's face as she watched him set the tray down on the table between them.

'Here you go, Celia,' Jacob said, handing Ms. Trent a mug.

'Thank you.' She took the mug and had a sip. 'Why, this is the loveliest tea I've tasted in years.'

Jacob blushed and planted himself beside Charlie, who disguised his laughter with a cough.

When Ms. Trent managed to pull her gaze away from Jacob, she looked at Charlie and said, 'I hear you're getting on great.' It wasn't a question, so he just nodded. 'Marvellous. Jacob, would you mind if I had a moment alone with Charlie?'

'Of course not. I'll be in the kitchen if you need me.' Jacob got up and left the room.

'You know, you're a lucky child to have found such a good home,' Ms. Trent said. 'You wouldn't believe how many kids would love to trade places with

you.’ She took another sip of her tea. ‘Jacob tells me you’re getting on well at school. I bet you’ve made many friends.’

Charlie took a sip of his tea. Why spoil her excitement? he thought. He sat back in the sofa. When it came to Ms. Trent, there wasn’t much to say. It was a one-woman show. She seldom asked questions; she often made assumptions. Still, he didn’t intend to protest, for she was right. He did feel lucky.

‘I’m glad you and Jacob are getting on well,’ Ms. Trent went on. ‘It seems like fate that you found each other. I know you’ve been waiting a long time to find a home, so I’m glad everything’s working out for you.’ With a fleeting glance at the door, she lowered her voice. ‘You are happy, aren’t you?’

Charlie nodded. ‘I like it here.’

Ms. Trent gave him a tentative smile. ‘Good. If there are any problems ... If you’ve had any confrontations at school, it’s best I know now rather than when it’s too late.’

Charlie’s pulse quickened. ‘No, no problems.’

‘Good.’ Ms. Trent breathed a sigh of relief. ‘I don’t want anything messing this up.’

‘By anything, you mean me.’ Charlie lowered his head.

‘That’s not what I meant. We’ve come far, and yes, it has been a rough four years, but things are starting to look up. Look at me.’

Charlie raised his head. Her expression was sympathetic, which made him feel worse. The two previous adoptions had failed because of him, because

of his strangeness and his inability to stay out of trouble. He knew it and Ms. Trent knew it.

‘Anyone would be lucky to have you,’ Ms. Trent said. ‘You remember that.’ She smiled. ‘Now, is there anything you would like to ask me?’

‘What happens now? Do I get to stay here?’

‘Yes,’ Ms. Trent replied. ‘There’s still a way to go before Jacob can file for adoption, so we shouldn’t get ahead of ourselves just yet. You two seem to have hit it off. I’m not making any promises but, between you and me, things are looking good.’

Charlie smiled. ‘I don’t have to move?’

‘No, but let’s just take things one step at a time, okay. Today is a good day.’ Ms. Trent started putting her shoes on. ‘If there’s anything you need, or you just want to talk, you know how to reach me. I’ll be back to visit you in three months. Until then, I hope all continues to go well. Can you tell that wonderful guardian of yours I’m leaving?’

Charlie was about to get up when Jacob entered the room. He was either psychic or an eavesdropper. Either way, he always had great timing.

‘Leaving so soon?’ Jacob asked.

‘I wish I had more time, but I’m afraid I must go,’ Ms. Trent said with an expression of utter disappointment. ‘It was good seeing you again, Charlie. Look after yourself. I’ll see you soon.’ She shook hands with him across the table and then followed Jacob out of the room.

After Ms. Trent left, Jacob called to Charlie, who got up and went into the hallway. ‘I’m just going to

pop out,' Jacob said, grabbing his coat off the hook. 'I won't be long.'

As soon as Jacob left, Charlie ran up to his room and pulled his suitcase out from under his bed. After he emptied it, he carried it downstairs, opened the door to the hallway cupboard, and flicked the light switch on. Entering the small storage area, he moved around a stack of boxes on his left and found a tight space in the corner. As he wedged his suitcase in, a few boxes fell on top of him, and he stumbled back, his foot hitting the wall behind him.

Hearing a soft clicking sound as he straightened up, he looked behind him and saw a small square gap where the wall had sunk in.

It was a door.

He crouched down, braced his hands against the wall, and slid the door open. Inside, he saw a cardboard box with iridescent lights pulsating out of it. He pulled it out and drew a sharp breath, staring in shock at a cluster of sparkling jewels.

Whoa!

One jewel in particular caught his attention: a green diamond with a triangular symbol engraved in it. It shone brighter than the others did, and he felt something warm flow through his veins as he gazed at it.

A loud hissing noise erupted inside the cupboard, and Charlie dropped the box, which landed upright on the floor, the jewels still secured inside it. The green diamond shimmered, and he heard strange yet familiar whisperings, like the kind he had heard a few weeks

ago. He was certain the voices were coming from the diamond.

The noise stopped. As he reached for the diamond, the sound of a door slamming made him jump. Panicked, he picked the box up, shoved it back inside the in-wall compartment, and closed the secret door. He started to replace the boxes he had knocked over when he heard the front door open.

‘I forgot something,’ he heard Jacob shout.

Charlie stepped out of the cupboard and saw him standing in the doorway, his expression alarmed. Charlie gulped and closed the cupboard door.

‘Everything all right?’ Jacob asked as he closed the front door.

‘Yeah. I was just putting my suitcase away.’

‘I hope it wasn’t any trouble.’ Jacob’s eyes stayed on Charlie the whole time.

‘I knocked over a few boxes, but no damage done.’

‘Good. I wouldn’t want you to hurt yourself.’

Charlie felt his blood rushing through his veins as Jacob’s intense gaze bored into him. ‘I should go do some work.’

‘It’s half term,’ Jacob reminded him.

‘Yeah, but I’m a little behind.’

Jacob smiled. ‘That enthusiasm is going to take you far, kid. Is there anything you want while I’m out?’

‘No, I’m okay.’ Charlie had a feeling Jacob was still watching him, so he acted casual as he headed upstairs. Once in his room, he sat on the bed, shaking. He hadn’t realised he’d been holding his breath until he

needed air. He didn't know what shocked him more: the secret stash of jewels or the whisperings from the diamond. It was only moments ago that he thought of Capeton as home. Now, as he looked around his room, that feeling was starting to change.

CHAPTER THREE



Where There's a Will There's Danger

‘**C**OME ON, JUST ONE jewel,’ Alex pleaded. She and Charlie were sitting on a two-tier bench inside the gym. It had been almost three weeks since he’d found the stash of jewels, and ever since he’d told her about it, she hadn’t stopped accusing Jacob of being a jewel thief. ‘We’d be doing the community a great service. It’s not as if he’s going to miss *one* jewel.’

‘No.’ Charlie’s voice was firm. ‘Just forget I ever mentioned it.’

‘I could try. I mean, it’s going to be hard, and I can’t guarantee the information won’t accidentally slip out, what with my mouth.’ Alex leaned closer to Charlie. ‘As a loyal friend, though, I’ll forget everything

you've said. But I'm going to need something in return.'

Charlie looked at her, stunned. 'Are you seriously blackmailing -?'

A whistle blew. 'Blake. Dench.' It was Coach Finley, standing in the middle of the room with his arms crossed, surrounded by students. 'Shall I make you two a cup of tea while I wait?'

Some of the students sniggered.

Charlie and Alex got up and joined the group.

P.E. had become a daunting lesson for Charlie. Playing a contact sport was the only time Josh could torture him and get away with it. Today, they were playing a game of dodge ball. It didn't help that muscle-bound Coach Finley thought getting a good bashing taught kids to be strong. Charlie figured his body-hugging t-shirt, red jack-ups and black headband was cutting off the circulation to his brain, clearly.

Coach Finley split the class into two teams. Charlie and Alex were on the same team, Josh and Damzel on the rival team. Just as Charlie had expected, several balls headed for him at the same time, and had it not been for his quick steps and the help from his teammates, he would have had bruises tattooed all over his body.

It came down to six players, three on each team. Charlie, Alex and Josh were still in the game. Charlie and Josh went for each other, and their balls collided with a bang. Josh lost a player, and Charlie lost Alex. When Josh regained a ball, Charlie expected to be his main target, but to his surprise, Josh threw the ball at

Alex. It hit her hard in the stomach, and she collapsed onto her knees.

‘Stop the game,’ demanded Coach Finley.

Charlie hurried over to Alex. ‘Are you okay?’

Alex nodded, unable to speak. It appeared Josh had knocked the air out of her.

‘You’ll be all right, Dench,’ Coach Finley said. ‘Walk it off.’

‘Yes, Coach,’ Alex managed to choke out as her teammates helped her over to the bench.

Seeing the triumphant expression on Josh’s face, Charlie marched over to him. ‘You did that on purpose.’

‘What if I did?’ Josh said. ‘Whatcha gonna do about it?’

‘Hartley, you either play fair or you’re outta the game,’ said Coach Finley.

Josh shrugged. ‘I didn’t know she was out, Coach.’

It was now two against two, and Charlie had one goal in mind: ‘I’ll take Hartley,’ he whispered to his teammate. Charlie and Josh dodged each other’s balls, but they lost their teammates.

Alex cheered. ‘Come on, Charlie.’

Charlie’s eyes fixed on Josh’s hands. He waited for him to make his move, and as though he was commanding him, Josh took the first shot. Charlie placed the ball in front of his chest, and Josh’s ball rammed into his. As soon as it bounced away, he threw his ball hard at Josh.

Bullseye!

Josh went down, clutching his stomach. Charlie's teammates cheered, and Alex was the first to run over and throw her arms around him.

Charlie leaned against the wall outside the girls' changing room where he had been standing for the past few minutes. The door opened, and three girls walked out. As they approached him, one of the girls greeted him.

'Hey,' he replied. He wasn't sure of their names, but he recognised their faces.

'You wanna walk with us?' the girl who had called to him asked.

'Thanks, but I'm waiting for someone.'

They smiled and walked off. A minute later, Alex came out of the changing room.

'I was just about to send out a search party,' Charlie joked.

Alex made a face at him. Linking her arm with his, they headed down the hallway. 'I'm starving. I bet the food's all gone by now.'

'And whose fault is that?'

'What can I say? Girls are more particular about personal hygiene.'

They stopped by their lockers.

'So was Josh still sulking?' Alex asked.

Charlie was standing four lockers away from her. 'You should have heard him. He swears he didn't throw the ball. He said it just flew out of his hands.'

‘He’s such a sore loser. He probably hates us more than anyone else now – well, you anyway.’

Charlie closed his locker door and strolled towards Alex. ‘He doesn’t scare me.’ He crossed his arms and leaned his shoulder against the locker next to hers.

‘So it’s Carla’s party next weekend,’ Alex said after a short pause. She didn’t look at Charlie when she spoke. ‘Bet it’s going to be fun, fun, fun.’

Charlie smiled. ‘That’s a lot of fun. Pity I won’t be there.’

Alex’s eyes flashed to his face. ‘You won’t?’ Although her expression was bland, it was evident from her high-pitched tone that she was happy about the news. ‘Why not?’

‘If you’re not going, I don’t see the point. I mean, you’re the only person I talk to, so who else am I going to make fun of?’

Alex smiled and elbowed him playfully.

‘Hey, Romeo,’ a familiar voice yelled behind them. Charlie rolled his eyes, but he didn’t turn around.

Alex closed her locker door. ‘Come on,’ she said, pulling Charlie by the arm.

As soon as they headed off, Charlie felt a thump on his back that made him stumble forward, but he kept his balance. He spun around. ‘What is your problem?’ he snapped.

Josh edged closer to him. ‘I’m looking at it. You think you’re a big shot standing up to me in the bus, eh. No one embarrasses me and gets away with it.’

‘Oh please,’ Alex said. ‘This isn’t about what

happened in the bus – not that anything did happen. Besides, that was ages ago. Admit it. This is about dodge ball. You're upset he beat you.'

Josh fixed her with a hostile glare.

If looks could kill, Charlie thought. 'You tripped me in front of the entire school. I'd say we're even.'

Josh shifted his attention back to Charlie. 'I decide when we're even.'

Hearing the shuffling of feet, Charlie's gaze darted to the students who were gathering around them. Looking back at Josh, he said, 'Just leave me alone.' He turned to walk away, but Josh grabbed his shoulder and swung him back around so they were once again face to face. 'Get off.' Charlie swung his arm in an attempt to break free and clocked Josh upside the head by mistake.

Josh looked at him with a mixture of shock and rage. Then his fist rose and –

Charlie felt himself falling backwards, and he hit the ground with a hard thud. A sharp pain shot through his right temple and cheek, and he groaned.

'What'd you do that for?' Alex retorted.

'What,' Josh said. 'He threw the first punch.'

Alex helped Charlie up. 'That wasn't deliberate, you moron.'

'Just leave it,' Charlie said to her. He turned around and pushed his way through the crowd.

A short while after, Alex caught up with him. 'Are you all right?' she asked.

'I'm fine.'

Alex grabbed his arm, and he stopped. Lifting a

hand to his face, she stroked his cheek. Charlie's body tensed. Her fingers felt cool against his skin.

'You're hot,' said Alex. Their eyes met, and she dropped her hand. 'I mean your body temperature.'

After a moment of awkward silence, they continued down the hallway.

'You need to go see the nurse,' Alex insisted. 'He hit you pretty hard. You have to report him.'

'No, I just want to forget it happened.' Charlie stopped in front of the boys' toilet and turned to her. 'You won't report it, will you?'

'He should be expelled.'

Charlie glanced left and right down the hallway and then inched closer to Alex, lowering his voice. 'If my social worker finds out, she'll freak. She already thinks I'm prone to trouble.'

Alex crossed her arms, pouting. 'Fine. I won't say anything.'

'And you won't do anything.'

Alex's eyes shifted to the side. 'I might have to check my locker door – make sure it's not faulty.' She sounded amused. Her gaze locked on Charlie, and he noticed the twinkle of mischief in her eyes. Pressing his lips into a tight line in an effort to keep a straight face, he raised his eyebrows at her. 'Okay,' she said. 'I won't do anything. Promise.' Her expression turned to concern. 'How's your face?'

Charlie massaged his right cheek, feeling a slight sting. 'It doesn't hurt much. I don't know how it looks' – he lowered his hand and turned his face to the side – 'but it can't be that bad. What do you think? You'd

date me, right?’

Alex pushed him away, grinning. ‘You’re an idiot.’

Charlie smiled, which was short lived as he spotted Josh at the other end of the hallway. He looked back at Alex. ‘Um, I need to’ – he pointed at the toilet door behind him – ‘I’ll meet you in the canteen.’ Before Alex could respond, he darted through the door, letting it swing shut behind him.

He headed over to the sink and looked at his pale reflection in the mirror. He splashed cold water on his flustered face, walked over to the window, which overlooked the sports field at the rear of the building, and opened it. When he saw the droplets of white flakes falling from the sky, he smiled. It was an unusual beginning to March.

Charlie all but forgot his distress until he heard the click of the door and turned around. He started to panic, wondering if Josh had come to finish what he’d started. When he saw Alex, he rolled his eyes. ‘Does any rule apply to you?’

‘What, it’s not as if you’re naked,’ she replied. ‘I just wanted to make sure you hadn’t passed out, in which case I’d have to give you mouth to mouth.’

‘It’s good I’m still breathing, then,’ Charlie said, the sarcasm in his voice not devoid of anxiety. He crouched down and sat on the cold ceramic floor.

Alex gasped. ‘It’s snowing.’ She dashed across the room and climbed onto the windowsill. ‘This is amazing. I hope it lasts long, that way we can have a snowball fight. I’d so beat you.’

Charlie glanced up at her. ‘I’m the dodge ball

champion, remember. You'd be a snowman by the time I finished with you.'

Alex laughed and nudged him with her foot. 'Arrogant much?'

Charlie held her leg and gently pulled her off the windowsill. 'Go before someone comes in.'

She flopped down beside him. 'I locked the door.'

Charlie regarded her in shock. 'Oh great, so I get punched in the face and now I'm going to get detention.' He sighed and leaned his head back against the wall. 'You know they'll think we're doing something.'

'Like what?'

'I don't know ... stuff.'

'At least they'll stop talking about your face.'

'Yeah, because now they'll be talking about me locking girls in the boys' toilet.'

Alex laughed, and Charlie narrowed his eyes at her. 'Who cares what they say? We're just friends, right?'

Charlie hesitated and then said, 'Yeah ... Friends.'

After a few seconds of silence, Alex asked, 'That means a lot to you, doesn't it?'

Following her gaze, Charlie looked down at his necklace, his hand clasped around the rings. He hadn't even realised he'd been holding them. 'They're my parents' wedding rings.' He slipped the chain inside his shirt. 'It's the only thing I have that belonged to them.'

'It's not the only thing. You belonged to them.'

They held each other's gazes for a long moment, until Charlie felt a heat rising inside him and looked

away, pulling on his shirt collar.

‘So about those jewels –’ Alex began.

‘Forget it. I’m not stealing it.’

‘We’re borrowing, not stealing. Something’s obviously going on, otherwise he wouldn’t need to hide them. Who knows what else he’s hiding.’ Alex leaned into Charlie and whispered, ‘I know you want to.’

Her warm breath tickled his ear, and he shivered from the electric tingles that shot through his body. He sighed. ‘I’m so gonna regret this.’

Charlie knew he was making a mistake, but the moment he opened the door to the hallway cupboard, his curiosity got the better of him. Turning the light on, he knelt down and slid the secret door open.

He froze.

It was empty.

Alarm bells started ringing inside his head, and that niggling feeling he got whenever he sensed something wrong churned in his stomach. He closed the secret door and turned the light off. When he stepped out of the cupboard, his heart stopped.

The front door was wide open, Jacob standing just outside the threshold, a light dusting of snow on the shoulders of his brown trench coat and felt hat. He stared at Charlie with an unreadable expression. After what seemed a long pause, he stepped inside the house, the exposed beams of the low ceiling just

inches from his head. 'You do love that cupboard, don't you?' His tone was calm. 'What's this, the third time now? Let me guess. You lost something again.'

'Er –' Charlie began.

'I should warn you,' Jacob interjected. 'I hate it when people lie to me.'

Just tell the truth. 'I heard a noise.'

Jacob slammed the door shut, and Charlie jumped. 'Try again.' His voice was low but as cold as steel.

Charlie swallowed the lump in his throat. 'It's the truth.'

'I've tried to be nice. I've given you everything you want, and this is how you repay me. Go to your room.'

Charlie didn't move. A crippling feeling of guilt mingled with something that was almost, but not quite, fear came over him. Jacob moved closer to him, and he stepped back.

'I said go to your room.'

'But I –' Charlie started to say.

'*But* doesn't exist in this house. Do as I say. Do I make myself clear?'

'But I –'

Charlie felt a powerful force crash against his face, and he stumbled and fell flat on his back on the cold floor. For a moment, confusion circled his mind, and then he felt a burning sensation on the left side of his face that stung his eyes. Ashamed of his tears, he blinked rapidly to prevent them from escaping.

'You will do as I say. Do I make myself clear?'

Jacob repeated.

Charlie nodded, rubbing his burning cheek. He got to his feet and scurried up to his bedroom. Sitting on his bed, his body trembling with rage, he tried to make sense of what had just happened, but he couldn't. Nothing made sense.

He got up and started pacing between the door and the window. The only thing he was certain of at that moment was that one side of his face felt numb while the other side felt as if it was on fire.

He sat down on the bed again, the sound of his heart drumming in his ears. Feeling a bead of sweat trickle down the back of his neck, he got up, walked over to the window, and opened it, cringing as the cold air stung his face. Staring up at the grey afternoon sky, he took deep breaths as he waited for his heart to slow.

Thirty minutes later, he sneaked into Jacob's bedroom. He didn't turn the light on. Jacob was in the living room, watching TV, and he figured it was a good time to use his get-out-of-jail-free card and make a call. He picked up the phone on the bedside table, and before he even finished dialling the number, he heard an automated female voice: *'The phone you are using does not allow outgoing calls.'* Charlie sighed. He had discovered the truth about hell: there was no escaping it once you've entered.

Ch Charlie was asleep in bed when a loud bang woke

him, and he jumped up. Seeing a tall figure standing in the doorway, he shrieked, remembering the shadow on the garden shed. When the lights came on and he saw Jacob, his body tensed.

‘Get dressed and meet me downstairs,’ Jacob demanded.

Charlie said nothing. He put on a grey tracksuit and went downstairs. Jacob was standing in the hallway, holding a black sack. He looked up at Charlie and said, ‘We’re going for a drive. Get in the car.’

The two-door black Morris Minor drove at a steady 30 mph along a quiet road. Charlie glanced at the clock on the dashboard that flickered with a green hue. It was 11:30 p.m. He looked back at the windscreen but couldn’t see much through the falling snow. Jacob hadn’t spoken a word to him since they’d left the house. The only place he could think of where Jacob would take him was Alpha Children’s Home.

There were sixty-five miles between Brentford and Capeton, and the journey was more than an hour and a half, but at the rate they were driving, it would probably take them three hours to get to their destination. What Charlie couldn’t understand was why Jacob had chosen to leave the house so late. And what about his belongings?

A low crackling noise interrupted Charlie’s thoughts, and he looked out the window. When no vehicle went by, he realised the noise was coming from

inside the car. His eyes rested on Jacob, whose hands were gripping the steering wheel with such force his knuckles had turned white. He twisted the leather wheel, as if strangling it, his jaw clenched and his nostril flared. Charlie looked away. He did not wish to see the look in his eyes.

Just when Charlie's mind started to wander again, the car jolted, and he lurched forward, his body held in the grips of his seatbelt. He grabbed on to his seat, fearing they had hit something. The car started bouncing up and down, as if springs had replaced the tyres. Squinting, he peered through the windscreen and saw trees ahead.

They were in the woods.

Charlie reached for his chain, clasping his hand tightly around his rings as his mind conjured up the possible scenarios that could be in store for him. He couldn't help but wonder if he was about to meet the same fate as his parents.

The car came to a stop, and the headlights faded. A second light lit up the inside of the vehicle, and Charlie glanced at Jacob, who was holding a torch. Jacob switched the engine off and got out of the car. He walked around the front to the passenger's side, opened the door, and grabbed Charlie by the arm, pulling him out of the car.

Charlie followed him as he led the way through the forest. They walked for ten minutes before Charlie, paying no attention at all, walked head on into something rock solid and flew back onto the snow-covered ground. He thought he'd walked into a tree

until he looked up at the blinding torchlight. Shielding his eyes with his hands, he managed to make out a large silhouette behind the light.

‘Would you be quiet,’ Jacob hissed, and then he walked off. Charlie heaved himself off the ground, dusted the snow off his clothes, and trailed behind. They walked for another two minutes until they came to a clearing, where they spotted a two-storey stone house.

‘Listen,’ Jacob whispered. ‘You and I are going inside to get a few things.’

Charlie puckered his brow. ‘Isn’t it a little late ...?’ His weary voice broke off. He looked at the house and then at Jacob and the black sack in his hand. He looked at the house again and then at Jacob and the sack. He looked at the house again and then ...

This went on for a bit, but when he finally connected it all, he gasped. Without thinking, he blurted out, ‘You’re a thief!’

Jacob clamped a hand over his mouth. ‘Be quiet,’ he said in a low yet stern voice. Shoving Charlie, he took a few steps towards the house but stopped when he realised Charlie wasn’t following him. ‘We haven’t got all day.’

Charlie blinked, dazed. He was certain he was dreaming. ‘You can’t be serious.’

Jacob grabbed him by the arm and pulled him towards the house. ‘Do you see me laughing?’

‘But –’ Charlie stopped talking. He had broken the forbidden rule. When Jacob didn’t retort, he said, ‘What about the owners?’

‘No one’s inside, you daft child. I’ve been watching the place.’

So that’s where he’s been sneaking off to, Charlie realised with shock.

‘Unless Edna’s ghost is guarding the place,’ Jacob went on, ‘I think we’re safe.’

‘Edna?’ Edna was the elderly woman Jacob had held a wake for a few weeks ago. ‘She was your friend.’

‘Now isn’t the time to be sentimental.’

‘But you’re stealing from a dead person,’ Charlie protested, dragging his weight as much as he could against the pull of his guardian. When they reached the front door, Jacob released him and crouched down. Charlie watched as he picked the lock. This man was just full of surprises. ‘This is wrong.’

Jacob stood up and grabbed him by the collar. ‘If you don’t shut up, you’ll be joining the old bag.’ Charlie’s face contorted with disgust from his reeking coffee breath.

‘I can’t do this.’ Charlie’s low voice was almost inaudible.

‘I don’t remember giving you an alternative, boy.’

He no longer had a name. It was now just “boy”.

Charlie stared into his guardian’s face, searching for something familiar. He didn’t find it. Jacob was more of a stranger to him now than he had been when they met five months ago.

Jacob started dragging him into the house, but Charlie kicked him in the shin and took off into the dark woods.

‘Get back here,’ Jacob yelled.

The snow crunched beneath Charlie's feet as he scuttled through the woods, not knowing where he was going. Whichever way he looked, darkness was creeping up on him. He had to squint to see through the falling snow. Hearing Jacob's voice some way behind him, he stopped and hid behind a tree.

The night was cold and misty. A gentle wind blew, making the hairs on the back of his neck prick, and he shivered. Apart from the slight crackling of twigs and the rustling of wildlife hidden in the darkness, it was quiet. Peering out from behind the tree, he saw the hazy light of the torch, which was moving away from him.

A snapping sound behind him made him jump, and he spun around. He gasped when he saw a figure moving towards him. It stopped close enough that he could see it wasn't Jacob – for it was too thin – but not close enough to allow him to make out a face.

'Be not afraid,' a soft voice said.

Panic rose inside Charlie, and he turned to run, but his feet slipped from under him, and he fell on his back. Glancing behind him, he saw that the figure had disappeared. Then he heard what sounded like fluttering wings, and he looked ahead, his eyes widening with fear.

The figure, wearing a long cloak, was standing a few feet away from him, a hood covering its head.

'My name is Candra,' the figure said.

'How did you ...? You were just ...' Charlie staggered to his feet.

'I do not wish to harm you, Charlie,' Candra said.

Charlie paused. *That voice ...* It sounded so familiar. He caught his breath in his throat. *It can't be.* 'How do you know my name?' he asked in a shaky voice.

'I have known you your whole life. I am here to protect you. I'm aware you are unnerved right now, but try to remain calm. The last thing we need is an earthquake.'

Charlie thought back to the tremor he had felt inside the canteen on his first day of school, and his breathing accelerated. His legs trembled as he took slow steps away from the woman.

'Listen carefully,' Candra said. 'The talisman you saw. You need it. You must restore it ...' She broke off, and an urgent edge crept into her voice. 'You are not listening. Focus.'

Charlie clenched his eyes shut. *She's not real. Wake up.* He opened his eyes, and the woman was still there. His heart kicked into overdrive when she disappeared and reappeared in front of him, leaving only inches between them. Seeing her intense green eyes, her face slashed with scars, he screamed.

No sooner had he tried to run than a violent windstorm assailed him. The snow and the dead leaves on the ground rose with the wind, attacking him. He fell once, twice, three times but got back up again.

As the wind grew stronger, it picked him up and threw him backwards. He hit the ground hard. Lying on his back, he heard faint footsteps. Soon, a blurry figure was standing over him. Then darkness swallowed him.

CHAPTER FOUR

4

The Other Thief

WHEN CHARLIE WOKE THE following day, it was several seconds before he remembered what had happened. He was lying in bed, looking through his photo album. The shock of what occurred that night had taken a while to wear off. For a time, he tried to convince himself that it had been a hallucination. Jacob wasn't a thief. There had been no woman with mysterious powers. After all, he wasn't in any pain, which he should have been had someone thrown him around like a rag doll as he'd thought. *Just a dream*, he told himself; yet he still could not get Candra out of his mind.

Frustrated, he thrust the photo album onto the

floor and sat up, swinging his legs out of bed. Candra's scarred but beautiful pale face kept flashing through his mind. She had looked to be in her thirties, her alluring green eyes clouded by the deepest sorrow

—

The sound of a click brought Charlie's thoughts to a sudden halt. He looked at the door and saw Jacob glaring at him.

'We're leaving at eleven tonight,' Jacob said. 'You better be ready.'

Charlie averted his eyes. 'How can I forget? You've been reminding me every second.'

'Don't get smart with me, you ungrateful brat.'

Charlie sprang to his feet. 'You expect me to be happy?' he said through clenched teeth.

'I expect you to do what you were brought here to do.'

Charlie paused, scowling as he processed Jacob's words. 'What do you mean?'

'Did you think I took you in out of the kindness of my heart? Let's face it. I'm not getting any younger. I need a new pair of legs.'

Charlie stared at Jacob in shock and indignation. 'You don't really want a son.' His low voice was tense. 'You never have.'

'Bravo.' Jacob clapped his hands together. 'I knew I made the right choice with you. The first time I saw you, you looked so lost. You had no one and nothing to your name. My mother used to say that a person with no expectations was a person with no disappointments. She was a clever woman, my mother.'

“Don’t let anyone tell you that you can’t have what you want”, she used to say.’ A vacant expression appeared on Jacob’s face as his gaze wandered around the room. After a moment, his eyes locked on Charlie, and he stared intently at him, as if he’d only just noticed him. ‘Why so glum? You have nothing to lose, so shut up and get on with it.’

‘How many times have you done this?’

Jacob grinned. ‘That depends on if you mean robbing from the dead or just in general.’

Oh great, I live with a kleptomaniac. Charlie felt a headache coming on. He looked at his clock – 11:40 a.m. – and remembered he had planned to meet up with Alex at twelve. ‘I’m going for a walk.’

Jacob huffed. ‘I don’t think so, boy.’ He grabbed the door handle and retreated out of the room, slamming the door shut.

Charlie heard keys jingling, followed by a loud click. He was on lockdown.

Charlie’s bedroom door unlocked.

It was time.

It took them a little over thirty minutes to arrive at their destination, longer than it had taken them the previous night, due to the slippery roads caused by the melting snow. The car veered off the road and entered the woods.

Charlie could see why someone like Jacob could get away with this for so long. It was easy to carry out

since Capeton was seventy percent woodland and thirty percent civilisation. One could easily get away with murder.

Jacob stopped the car. He got out and Charlie followed. They headed through the woods and arrived at the same house they had visited twenty-four hours ago.

‘Let’s try this again,’ Jacob said. ‘We go in, get the goods, and get out. You better not mess up this time.’

Easy for you to say, Charlie thought. As they headed towards the house, he kept glancing behind him, as if expecting to see someone – or something.

They entered the house.

Jacob led the way into the living room on the immediate right, his torch in hand. ‘Keep up and touch nothing.’ He gave Charlie the black sack while he moved towards a glass cabinet to collect his earnings – or so he called it. Opening the doors, he shone the light on a set of silver and vintage crockery. He picked up a silver bowl tray, and a huge grin spread across his face. ‘Just one of these is worth a fortune.’

Charlie glanced around the room, his gaze focused on the photos on the wooden wall shelf above the sofa. He wrinkled his nose at the musty odour pervading the cramped space. ‘Isn’t someone going to notice things are missing?’

‘Not if they don’t know what there is to miss.’ Jacob closed the cabinet doors, and he and Charlie headed back to the hallway. ‘Edna has one son, who she hadn’t seen in six years. He wouldn’t know if the roof was missing.’

Charlie was about to follow him through to the kitchen when a faint creaking noise reached his ears, and he stopped. Glancing down at the carpeted floor, he took a step back and then a step forward, but he heard nothing.

The noise returned, and his eyes flashed to the hallway cupboard. A strange feeling gripped him as he approached the cupboard. On the count of three, he pulled the door open, and a beam of light blinded him. Charlie covered his eyes with his hand. His only reaction was to point his torch towards the other light.

He was staring at a young boy with short blond hair and bright blue eyes, wearing shabby, oversized clothes. The boy stared at him in shock.

They stood in silence, both startled, it appeared. Charlie saw a black bag in the boy's hand, like the one he was holding – except the boy's bag was full.

Jacob reappeared in the hallway. 'What's taking you so long?'

Before Charlie could respond, the boy jetted past him, heading towards the front door.

Jacob shouted after him, but the boy dashed through the door. 'Who was that?' Jacob asked, panicked. When Charlie didn't answer, he grabbed him and pushed him up against the wall. 'Who was that?'

'I don't know.'

'Well, go after him and find out.'

Charlie headed towards the open front door, but when he got outside, the boy had vanished.

Monday arrived, and Charlie was glad to get out of the house. Jacob had confined him to his bedroom with no outside privileges for the entire weekend. He went from being an orphan, to almost being a son, to being a prisoner, all in the space of two months.

The day passed in a blur. Charlie was sitting in the school bus, staring out the window as he headed home. He wanted to tell Alex everything, but Jacob's constant threats to bury him alive made him think otherwise. He didn't want to get her caught up in his mess of a life.

'Are you going to tell me or not?' Alex asked.

'I told you,' he said. 'He moved them. End of story.'

'But it's not the whole story, is it?'

'Yes, it is.'

'You've been avoiding me all day, so clearly there's something you're not telling me.'

'Quit already.'

Alex frowned and crossed her arms. 'It always feels as if you're hiding things from me.'

'It's not my fault you're paranoid.'

'I'm not the paranoid one staring out the window every second.'

'Maybe that's because you're doing my head in.' Noticing students staring at them, Charlie released an exasperated breath and ran a hand through his hair. He tugged on his shirt collar and loosened his tie. It felt as if his body temperature had gone up ten degrees.

The bus slowed as it approached a stop.

Charlie glanced back out the window, and a movement across the other side of the road caught his attention. He saw a boy running across a large meadow, heading towards a forest, and his jaw dropped. It was the boy from Edna's house.

As the bus came to a stop, Charlie got up and climbed over Alex.

'Where are you going?' Alex asked. 'This isn't your stop.'

'I have to sort something out. I'll see you tomorrow.' Charlie headed down the aisle and exited the bus, walking towards the rear end. It wasn't until the bus pulled away that he glanced in its direction and saw Alex walking towards him. 'What are you doing?'

'What are *you* doing?' she asked.

Charlie looked towards the meadow. 'I told you I had something to sort out.'

'Do you know him?'

Charlie glanced back at Alex and saw her looking towards the meadow. 'No, but I've seen him around.'

Alex shot him a suspicious look. 'So what's this thing you have to sort out?' She looked back in the direction of the boy. 'Has it got something to do with him?'

'No.' The word couldn't have flown out of Charlie's mouth any faster.

'Fine. Don't tell me.' Alex headed towards the meadow.

'Where're you going?'

'We're following him.'

‘Wait, what?’ Charlie’s voice sounded strained. ‘Alex, we can’t just follow him.’

Alex looked back at him and smiled.

Charlie pursued her. He didn’t want Alex present when he confronted the boy in fear she may find out what occurred two nights ago.

‘Let’s just see what he’s up to,’ Alex suggested.

‘We’re not following him.’

‘You got off the bus fast enough. Were you planning to watch him from afar?’ Alex stopped in front of the barbed-wire fence and turned to Charlie. ‘You coming or not?’ She tossed her bag over the fence, got down onto her stomach, and crawled under the wire. Rising to her feet, she brushed dirt off her clothes. ‘Maybe he’s up to something. Or maybe he’s an alien.’

‘Yeah, that’s it, he’s an alien.’

‘We won’t know unless we follow him. Look, you got off the bus for whatever reason. It’s a long walk home for nothing. We’re here, so we might as well do something.’

‘I know, but –’

‘But nothing. You’re not afraid, are you?’

An image of Candra flashed across Charlie’s mind. ‘No.’

‘Well, come on, then.’

Charlie glanced in the direction the bus had headed and looked at his watch. It was nearing four in the afternoon. He deliberated for a moment and then handed his bag to Alex before climbing under the fence. ‘Thirty minutes, tops.’

Alex smiled, and they took off.

It took them a couple of minutes to get across the meadow. They would have been quicker had it not been for the knee-high wild grass they had to wade through. Tall trees guarded the dense forest, blocking out most of the sunlight. They saw the boy with a bag on his back and followed him.

They walked for fifteen minutes until they came across a small, shabby wooden shack in the old growth Douglas-fir forest. Hiding behind a tree, they watched as the boy went inside the shack.

‘Shall we knock?’ Alex whispered in Charlie’s ear, and he flinched. ‘What’s with you? You’re so jumpy.’

‘No, I’m not,’ he snapped. ‘And no, we’re not knocking.’

‘We didn’t come all this way for nothing.’

‘What are we supposed to say? Sorry, just thought we’d follow you.’

‘It is the truth.’

‘Let’s just wait until he comes out.’

‘Then what?’

‘I don’t know. This was your idea.’

Alex crossed her arms. ‘Well, I say we knock –’

A loud scream cut her off. She and Charlie poked their heads out from behind the tree and saw the boy running towards them. As the boy drew nearer to them, they came out of their hiding spot, and the boy came to a sharp halt in front of them. His blue eyes studied Charlie, as if searching for a missing piece to a puzzle, and as though he found it, he looked stunned. Charlie knew what he was thinking, but before he

could assure him he wasn't there to recover the stolen goods, Alex spoke.

'Why are you screaming?' she asked the boy.

Suddenly, as if he just remembered something, his eyes widened, and he glanced back in the direction he had come from. Charlie looked at Alex, and his own confusion mirrored back at him.

'What is it?' Alex asked.

The boy pointed at the shack. 'So-so-something's in there.' His soft voice trembled.

'Something like what?' Charlie asked.

The boy turned to him. He seemed to freeze for a moment, his expression distant. Finally, he shrugged and said, 'I don't know.'

'You don't live in the shack, do you?' Alex asked.

The boy's expression became nervous, and he turned away from them.

Alex looked at Charlie and gestured towards the boy. When Charlie didn't budge, she rolled her eyes and gave him a nudge.

'Where are your parents?' Charlie asked. The boy kept his back to him. Glancing back towards the run-down shack, Charlie realised he didn't have it half as bad as the kid. 'So how big is this thing?'

The boy turned to him. 'Big,' he replied with raised eyebrows.

'But it didn't attack you, right?'

The boy shook his head.

'Charlie,' Alex said. 'You're not thinking what I think you're thinking, are you?'

'We'll just take a peek,' Charlie replied.

‘No way. Let’s just leave.’

‘I wanna see what’s inside,’ the boy said.

‘Weren’t you the one screaming a minute ago –?’

Alex began.

‘Just wait here for us,’ Charlie said.

Alex folded her arms across her chest. ‘Yeah, sure, I’ll just be Little Red Riding Hood waiting for the wolf to come eat me.’

‘There are wolves here?’ the boy said, alarmed.

‘No,’ Charlie assured him, ‘there are no wolves.’

He looked at Alex and frowned, and then his gaze lowered, his eyes sweeping across the ground. ‘We need something big.’ Spotting a piece of wood, he walked over to it and picked it up, hitting it against his palm to test its durability.

‘This is crazy,’ Alex said. ‘You can’t go in there.’

‘But that’s my house,’ the boy pleaded.

‘That’s not a house. You can’t live here. It’s too dangerous.’

Charlie pulled Alex aside. ‘If we go now, he might not come with us. We can’t just leave him here.’

‘He clearly needs help. We have to go to the police –’

‘No!’

Charlie glanced around and saw the boy take off in the opposite direction of the shack. ‘Wait.’ He dashed after him.

Although the boy was fast, Charlie quickly gained on him. As he drew nearer to the boy, he stretched his arm out and grabbed him, forcing him to stop.

‘I’m not going to the police,’ the boy protested,

shrugging Charlie off him. 'You can't make me.'

'We're not going to the police,' Charlie promised him.

Alex caught up with them. She looked at the boy, who watched her warily. 'I get it. No police.' She bent forward to catch her breath. 'You act as if you robbed a bank or something.'

Charlie met the boy's eyes, his face a visible expression of unbearable shame. They broke their gazes when Alex straightened up.

'What do we do now?' she asked.

'We check the shack,' Charlie said. He looked at the boy. 'What's your name?'

The boy hesitated a moment, his eyes shifting between them. 'Richmond,' he said.

'I'm Charlie, this is Alex.' Taking a deep breath, Charlie looked back in the direction they had come from. 'Let's go.'

It took them a few minutes to return to the shack. Charlie and Alex dropped their bags beside a tree and proceeded towards the front door.

'You know that curiosity killed the cat isn't just a saying, right?' Alex whispered to Charlie. 'It's a warning that we should leave when something's wrong.'

Charlie stopped and turned to her. 'You want to see what's inside, don't you?'

'Yes, but -'

'But nothing. You're not afraid, are you?'

'No,' Alex spat.

'Let's go, then.'

They advanced towards the shack with caution, Charlie in front, followed by Richmond and then a reluctant Alex. They moved alongside the front wall and ducked beneath the window.

'I'm telling you,' Alex continued her protest, 'if that cat wasn't so nosy, it would've been climbing trees with the rest of 'em –'

'Shh,' Charlie hissed. He got up and peered through the window but couldn't see anything through the grime. Using the end of his coat sleeve, he wiped away a small patch of dirt in the bottom corner and looked inside.

'What d'you see?' Alex asked.

'Nothing,' he replied.

'Maybe it's gone.'

Holding a tight grip on the stick, Charlie headed for the entrance. The door creaked as he opened it. The little light shining through the window was enough for his anxious eyes to survey the box room. Opening the door wider, he stepped over the threshold, Richmond and Alex right behind him.

The lack of fresh air was suffocating. Charlie couldn't imagine how Richmond could spend half an hour much less an entire day in the room. There were no light sockets or lamps, only a bucket of charred wood in the corner, which explained the burning smell.

Richmond nudged him and pointed towards the window where Charlie saw a flattened cardboard box on the floor, covered with blankets and mismatched cushions – a replacement for a bed, he guessed. But

that wasn't what Richmond was pointing at. He was looking at the lump on top of the bed, covered with a threadbare brown blanket.

Charlie looked at Alex, who was holding the door open to shed more light into the room – and if needed, to make a quick getaway. Taking a deep breath, he held the stick out in front of him and stepped forward.

Suddenly, the lump stirred, and Charlie stopped. Before he could back away, he felt a tight pressure around his ankles, and he fell backwards. When he hit the wooden floor, the stick fell out of his hand. The figure pounced on top of him and pinned him to the floor by his arms.

Smothered in the itchy material, Charlie struggled against the weight of his assailant to no avail. He couldn't see anything but darkness.

'Get off him,' he heard Alex yell through the scuffling noises around him. The next moment, he heard a faint thud, followed by a loud whimper, and the pressure on his arms loosened.

The room came back into view, and he saw Alex and Richmond standing over him. Alex was holding the stick as if it was a sword, a fierce look on her face.

'What's he doing?' Richmond asked.

Charlie got to his feet and looked at the figure on the floor. It was shivering beneath the blanket. Hearing a deep, mournful groan, the trio looked at one another with terrified eyes. Then tortured screams filled the room, and the figure began to twitch uncontrollably.

The trio bolted.

They were a good fifty feet from the shack when Charlie stopped. 'Wait,' he said. Alex and Richmond stopped and turned to him. 'We can't just leave him. What if he's hurt?'

'Oh my god, I hit him,' Alex said. 'What if he's dead?'

'You hit him with a stick, you didn't shoot him.'

Alex looked at the piece of wood as if it was toxic and dropped it. 'This wouldn't have happened if we hadn't come here. I told you we should have left.'

Charlie raised his eyebrows. 'Ah, *bello!* Does "let's follow him" ring a bell?'

'You got off the bus first. We were safe with my plan. I said we shouldn't go inside.'

'It was your plan that led us here in the first place.'

'Yeah, and now this guy's probably dead because *I* hit him.' Alex's lips trembled, and a sad look came into her eyes. She turned away.

After a moment of silence, Charlie inched closer to her, resting a hand on her shoulder. 'It wasn't your fault. You were just helping me.'

Alex turned to him, her brown eyes glistening. 'You don't think he's dead, do you?'

Charlie glanced back towards the shack. 'Only one way to find out.'

It took the three of them a lot longer to reach the shack than it had when they were following Richmond; naturally, for caution had taken the place of speed.

Charlie couldn't help but feel a slight case of déjà vu as they hid behind a tree, staring at the half-open door.

'I don't think he's coming out,' Charlie said. He looked at Alex and Richmond. 'Ready?'

Alex and Richmond exchanged nervous glances and then looked back at Charlie and nodded.

They headed towards the shack. Charlie paused in front of the door, his heart hammering so hard he wondered if the person inside could hear it. Leaning forward, he peeked through the gap between the door and the frame and saw two eyes staring at him.

A man was sitting on the cardboard bed, the blanket wrapped around him, leaving only his head exposed. Charlie held his gaze, afraid of what would happen if he took his eyes off him.

'You wouldn't happen to have a lighter, would you?' the man asked in a hoarse voice.

It surprised Charlie how calm his tone was. He opened the door wider.

'Whichever one of you I grabbed, I'm sorry.' The man had an American accent. 'I didn't mean to hurt you.'

'You didn't,' Charlie said.

'Well, I'm sorry if I scared you.'

'You didn't scare me.'

The man gave him a weak smile. His eyes flickered to the bucket of wood in the corner. 'About that lighter.'

'I have one,' said Richmond.

Charlie glanced at him, but Richmond wasn't

looking at the man. Following his gaze, Charlie saw a large rucksack on the floor beside the bucket.

‘May I borrow it?’ the man asked.

The trio exchanged wary glances.

‘I’ll give it back,’ the man said. ‘I would just like to warm up a bit.’

Charlie hesitated a moment and then went over to the bucket. Rummaging through Richmond’s bag, he pulled out a kitchen lighter, which he used to set the wood alight. He returned to the others and joined them in their staring game.

‘Thank you.’ The man studied the three of them with curiosity. ‘Why did you come back?’

‘You sounded like you were in pain,’ Charlie answered.

The man looked surprised. ‘You came back to check on me? You realise I could be dangerous.’

‘If you were, you wouldn’t be telling us,’ Charlie pointed out.

The man looked directly at him, a twinkle of amusement in his eyes. ‘Fair point.’

‘What are you doing here?’ Alex enquired.

‘Well, I *was* trying to sleep,’ the man replied.

‘But this is my house,’ said Richmond. ‘I found it first.’

The man studied Richmond, his face creased with concern, and then his gaze drifted around the desolate shack. ‘You live here?’

Richmond nodded.

The man grimaced and squeezed his eyes shut, his face twisted in pain as he hunched forward, a small

groan escaping his throat.

‘Are you okay?’ Alex asked.

The man sat up and rested his head against the wall behind him. He opened his eyes and let out a laboured sigh. ‘No,’ he choked out. ‘I am certainly not okay.’

‘Are you ill?’ Richmond asked.

‘No. I’m just old.’

The trio looked at one another in bewilderment.

‘I’m sorry I hit you,’ Alex said.

‘That was you? That’s quite an arm you got there.’ The man took the blanket off himself and staggered to his feet. Dressed in black trousers, a long black coat that seemed two sizes too large and shoes so shiny they could pass for mirrors, he was a far cry from a pauper. When he straightened up, the trio stepped back.

‘I said I was sorry,’ Alex said, her voice strained.

The man looked at her. His face, framed by thick greying hair, looked weary and seemed prematurely lined, but his olive-green eyes were alight. ‘I accept your apology.’ He went over to the fire bucket and knelt down beside it, warming his hands up. He started laughing. ‘Beaten by a girl,’ he said, more to himself than to the trio. ‘Story of my life.’ His laughter turned into a wheezing cough.

‘I didn’t hurt you, did I?’ Charlie heard the worry in Alex’s voice. She made a move towards the man, but he grabbed hold of her and pulled her back. ‘I only hit you ‘cause I thought you were hurting Charlie. If I’d known you were old, I wouldn’t have ...’ Alex

paused for one beat, and then the rest of her words came out in a rush. 'I didn't mean *old* old. My parents said I should respect the elderly.' Her eyes opened wide with a strange side-splitting horror. 'But you're obviously not old enough to be an elderly –' She broke off when Charlie grabbed her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. She hung her head.

'You were looking out for your friend,' the man said. 'I understand.'

Alex raised her head. 'But just so you know, I don't go around beating people up. This was a first.'

The man smiled. He got up, walked back over to the bed, and sat down.

'Why were you screaming?' Richmond enquired.

The man looked at the window. 'I'm going through some changes.' He raked his hair out of his face, and for a split second, an eerie feeling crept over Charlie. It was a familiar feeling, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

'What changes?' Alex asked.

The man looked at her. 'The kind you wouldn't believe.'

'Try us,' said Charlie.

The man averted his gaze from them again. After a moment, he glanced back at them, and a speculative look came into his eyes. 'How old do I look?'

The trio looked at one another, neither one willing to answer.

'It's all right,' the man insisted. 'I just want to know the truth.'

'Don't you know how old you are?' Richmond

asked.

‘Oh, I know how old I am. I just don’t know how old I look. I stopped looking in the mirror about a week ago, and for me ... a lot changes in a week.’

Charlie and Richmond regarded Alex. ‘I think I’ve insulted him enough,’ she whispered.

Charlie looked back at the man and said, ‘I’d guess you’re about ... fifty?’

The man sighed, rubbing his forehead.

‘I meant forty-five,’ Charlie corrected himself.

The man chuckled. ‘It’s all right, kid. At this rate, I’d be dead in a month.’

Charlie glanced at Alex and Richmond, who both looked as confused as he felt. Addressing the man, he asked, ‘Do you want us to take you to a hospital?’

‘Thanks for the offer, kid, but there isn’t a doctor in this world who can help me.’ The man paused, as if deciding whether or not to continue. ‘I’m not fifty – or forty-five. My name is Derkein Odessa. I’m from Long Island, New York and I’m twenty-seven years old.’

An awkward silence filled the room. It was as if the man had spoken a foreign language and the trio hadn’t understood a single word of it.

‘Did I hit you on the head?’ Alex asked.

Derkein smiled without humour. ‘I didn’t think you’d believe me.’

An unsettling feeling stirred within Charlie. He was certain he had heard the name Derkein before. He just couldn’t remember where. ‘Have we met before?’ he asked.

‘I doubt it.’ Derkein slipped his hand inside his jacket and pulled out a thin blue book. ‘Take it,’ he said, holding the book up.

Charlie stepped forward, snatched the book, and stepped back. On the cover were the words *PASSPORT* and *United States of America*. He looked back at Derkein.

‘Go ahead,’ Derkein insisted. ‘Have a look.’

Charlie opened the passport to the photo page, and his heart stopped. It was all there: Derkein Odessa, 22 JUL 1985, New York, U.S.A. He was looking at a photo of a young man in his twenties. He heard Alex gasp beside him. She said something, but he didn’t hear it, for his mind was elsewhere. That feeling of familiarity came over him again, but this time he knew why.

It wasn’t the first time he was seeing the man in the photo. The wrinkle-free young face, shoulder-length black hair, still olive-green eyes staring back at him –

‘Hard to believe, isn’t it?’ Derkein’s voice interrupted Charlie’s thoughts. ‘A few weeks ago, I looked like the person in that photo. Now look at me.’

Charlie stared at Derkein in utter disbelief. His first impression was that he was dreaming. He had to be. There was no other explanation for it. He felt the passport slip out of his hand, but he didn’t take his eyes off Derkein. The last time he had seen those eyes they were staring into oblivion. Now here he was. Alive when he was supposed to be dead. Real when he wasn’t even supposed to exist.

CHAPTER FIVE



Finding Wakeman

CHARLIE HADN'T REALISED HE had passed out until he woke up and found himself staring at a wooden ceiling.

'The ironic thing is that my father always lectured me about growing up,' he heard Derkein say. 'Now it appears I can't stop ageing.'

Charlie raised himself up and saw that he was lying on the cardboard bed, the others sitting around him. He leaned his back against the wall. With the door now closed, the room was warmer.

'You all right?' Derkein asked him. Charlie stared at him in shock. 'The truth was a little too much for you, huh.'

Charlie looked away. 'You have no idea.' He still couldn't fathom how or why he had dreamt about Derkein. Another thing he couldn't wrap his mind around was why, of all the cities in the entire world, Derkein had turned up in Capeton.

'Hey.' It was Alex. He blinked several times before meeting her eyes. 'What is it?'

'I think I'm going crazy,' Charlie confessed. He stood up and ambled across the room. After a few deep breaths, he turned around and looked at Derkein. 'This can't be happening.'

'I've told myself that every day for the past month,' Derkein said. 'It's hard to accept something so ... bizarre. If it wasn't happening to me, I wouldn't believe it either.'

'No, you don't get it. You can't be here ...' Charlie paused. 'Why are you here?'

'I'm looking for someone.'

Charlie thought back to the dream, trying to remember the conversation between Derkein and his father. Then it came to him. 'Thomas,' he muttered.

A tentative look crossed Derkein's face as he weighed up what Charlie had said. He got to his feet and shot a nervous glance out the window. Charlie noticed him clutching something inside his coat, and he couldn't help but wonder if it was the talisman.

'What's going on?' Alex asked.

'How do you know about Thomas?' Derkein growled.

Alarmed, Alex and Richmond jumped up and scuttled over to Charlie.

‘Who are you?’ Derkein’s suspicious eyes flickered between the window and Charlie. ‘You’re one of them, aren’t you?’ He put his hand inside his trouser pocket and pulled out a two-blade pocketknife.

The trio pulled back, their frightened eyes fixed on the sharp blades.

‘Charlie.’ Alex grabbed his arm. Charlie didn’t shift his gaze from Derkein. He saw something in the man’s eyes that made him look less threatening. He realised it was fear.

‘How do you know about Thomas?’ Derkein demanded, the hand with the pocketknife trembling.

‘You wouldn’t believe me,’ Charlie said.

Derkein studied him, his expression curious. ‘Try me.’

Charlie gulped. ‘Okay. This is going to sound strange, but just don’t freak out. A few weeks ago, I had a dream ... about you.’

Derkein’s brow wrinkled in confusion. ‘I don’t know what game you’re playing here –’

‘It’s the truth. I saw you die.’

Alex tightened her grip on Charlie’s arm. ‘What are you doing?’

Charlie looked at her. ‘I know it sounds crazy,’ he said, ‘but it’s the truth.’ Alex gave him a sympathetic look. ‘You have to believe me.’

‘Charlie.’ It was Derkein. Charlie turned to him and saw that he looked less tense. The hand with the pocketknife had lowered. ‘This dream ... What was it about?’

Charlie paused as he tried to remember the

details, and then he said, 'You were in an office with your dad. He gave you some sort of talisman and told you to find Thomas. Then something attacked you, and he ... vanished.'

Derkein looked horror-stricken. 'That's not possible. There's no way you can know that.'

Charlie didn't know what to say. It made no sense to him either.

'Maybe you're psychic,' said Richmond, who was standing by the door, holding it open.

'I'm not psychic,' Charlie disagreed; but a small part of him did wonder.

It was nearing six in the evening, and darkness had fallen over the forest. The trio were sitting on the floor with Derkein, who had told them about his arrival in West Sussex a week ago in search of a man named Thomas Wakeman.

'My father met him thirty years ago,' Derkein was saying. 'He'd lodged with Thomas for a while as he helped renovate his house. Dad always said it was his first step to becoming an architect.'

Charlie saw a glimmer in Derkein's eyes at the mention of his dad, who had been missing since the day of the attack back in January. 'We'll find your dad,' he assured Derkein. 'He'll be fine. He always is, remember.'

Derkein stared at him, half surprised, half amazed. 'Have you had any other dreams about me?'

Charlie shook his head.

‘Have you had dreams like this before?’ Derkein enquired.

All eyes fixed on Charlie. As his temperature rose, his palms started to sweat. ‘No,’ he finally said, rubbing his hands on his trousers. He looked away. ‘So how’s this Wakeman guy supposed to help you?’

‘Yeah, is he a magician?’ Richmond asked.

‘No,’ Derkein said. ‘From what my father told me, he was an explorer. I only heard about Thomas a few years ago, after my mother passed away. Dad had this crazy idea that he could somehow revive her.’

‘Revive her?’ said Charlie. ‘Like, bring her back from the dead?’

‘Yes.’ Derkein laughed to himself. ‘Of course, I thought he’d finally cracked, but then he mentioned Thomas. You see, Thomas had told him about a place called Arcadia ...’ His voice trailed off, and he exhaled. ‘Arcadia is a world at the centre of the earth.’

Silence.

‘Come again?’ Alex said.

‘I don’t know why I told you that,’ Derkein said in an almost relieved tone. ‘I’ve never mentioned Arcadia to anyone before.’

‘Are you messing with us?’ Charlie asked.

‘Believe me,’ Derkein replied, ‘this is not something I would joke about.’

‘So you’re saying there’s an actual world inside the earth?’

‘That is what I’m saying.’

‘Like a real world?’ Alex asked. ‘Where people

live?’

‘Believe me, I know how it sounds,’ said Derkein. ‘I didn’t take my father seriously at first. He’s been searching for an entrance to Arcadia for years now. On the night of the attack, he gave me this.’ Slipping his hand inside his coat, he pulled out the talisman Charlie had seen in his dream.

Candra’s face flashed across Charlie’s mind, and that’s when it hit him: the reason he hadn’t been able to stop thinking about her. It was the talisman. She had mentioned something about a talisman. But there was no way she could have been talking about *this* talisman, he decided. It wasn’t possible.

Derkein removed the object from around his neck and held it in his hand. ‘Whatever it was that attacked me had intended to kill me. The pain I felt was like no other. I should be dead, but for some reason, I’m not.’

‘You think that saved your life?’ Alex asked.

‘It’s the only explanation that makes sense.’ Derkein handed the talisman to Alex, who examined it with curiosity. Charlie leaned into her to get a better look.

Engraved in the steel band were four triangular symbols:



‘What do they mean?’ Alex asked.

‘Earth, air, fire and water,’ Derkein replied.

‘They’re symbols of the four elements. It’s my guess someone used the talisman in a ritual of some sort.’

‘You mean like witchcraft?’

‘Possibly.’

Alex handed the talisman to Charlie, and immediately, a wave of emotions hit him. A series of images flashed through his mind like an old newsreel: a shimmering white-haired being with large golden wings of a thousand feathers, the talisman with a black diamond in the centre, a blinding light and fragments of sparkling dust.

Charlie sat as still as a rock, his eyes wide open in shock.

‘What is it?’ Alex asked.

Charlie didn’t answer right away. He looked down at the talisman and then back at the others. ‘Nothing,’ he finally answered. Handing the talisman to Derkein, he sat back, keeping his eyes averted from Alex’s perceptive scrutiny.

‘I can’t believe the nerve of Mrs. Blackman,’ Alex complained. It was nearing four in the afternoon, and she and Charlie were walking through the forest, heading for the shack. ‘What’s the point of being a librarian if you don’t want people asking questions?’

‘Can you blame her for throwing us out?’ Charlie said. ‘We’ve been asking the same question three days in a row. She probably thinks we’re playing a game. We’re lucky she didn’t ban us.’

‘It’s a school library. She can’t ban us.’ Alex sighed and kicked at the air. ‘This Wakeman guy probably doesn’t even exist.’

‘He has to exist. Someone must have heard of him. We just have to keep asking around.’

After a short silence, Alex asked, ‘Jacob still doesn’t know about Rich, right?’

Charlie shook his head. ‘He’s too busy to notice.’

‘What if he finds out? What would you do?’

Charlie shrugged. ‘Guess I’d be on the run too.’

A shadow of sadness crossed Alex’s face. ‘But you wouldn’t actually leave, right?’

‘I don’t want to, but ...’ Charlie exhaled. ‘I don’t know.’

‘I still think you should tell your social worker.’

‘I can’t. I promised Rich I wouldn’t.’

Alex grabbed Charlie’s shoulder, pulling him to a stop. ‘Look, I get it. I feel sorry for him too, but he’s only twelve. He needs to go back to his foster home. You can’t look after him.’

‘Guys,’ a familiar voice called.

They glanced in the direction of the shack and spotted Richmond standing in the doorway. Charlie and Alex locked eyes for a moment.

‘Just think about it,’ Alex said, and she went ahead, Charlie following behind her.

‘How did it go?’ Derkein asked as they entered the shack. He was sitting on the cardboard bed.

‘Sorry,’ Alex said. ‘We’ve still got nothing.’

Charlie glanced at the talisman dangling around Derkein’s neck and shuddered. He still didn’t know

what to make of the images he had seen when he'd touched it a few days ago, but since then, he hadn't gone within two feet of it. 'How'd it go with you?' he asked Richmond.

Richmond sighed. 'No one's heard of him.'

'We have to face it,' said Derkein. 'He must have moved on. It has been a while since my father last saw him.'

'Are you sure there was nothing else your dad said to you?' Charlie asked.

'Trust me, if my father had said anything else to me, I would have remembered.' There was sadness in Derkein's voice, along with another emotion Charlie could not grasp: anger? Regret? 'I didn't know my father as well as I would have liked to. He was there, and I was there. We were just never there at the same time.' He got up and tucked the talisman inside his shirt. 'I appreciate all your help.' He headed towards the door.

'Where're you going?' Charlie asked.

'I need to clear my head. I'll be back.' Derkein gave them a reassuring smile and left.

'He's getting older,' Alex observed. 'It's as if he ages a year every day.'

'We'll find Thomas,' Charlie assured her. 'He's here. He has to be.'

'Guys,' Richmond said. 'You don't think Derkein's gone, do you?'

'No. He just needs some time alone.' Alex and Richmond didn't look convinced. After a moment's pause, Charlie said, 'Then again, it is a big forest, so he

could get lost.' With that in mind, they left the shack.

A few minutes later, they came across a shallow stream.

'How long have you been living in the shack?' Alex asked Richmond.

'Two weeks.'

'Weren't you afraid?'

Richmond shrugged. 'Sometimes. At night it's a bit scary 'cause of all the noise and stuff, but when it's light out it's okay, I guess.'

'Your foster parents must be going crazy,' Charlie said.

'I doubt they've even noticed I'm not there.'

Charlie heard the anger in Richmond's voice. 'They move you around a lot, huh?'

Richmond nodded.

Alex put her arm around Richmond's shoulder. 'I think you're brave,' she said. 'I'd be terrified staying out here alone.'

Richmond smiled, but then his expression turned serious. 'You don't think Derkein's going to die, do you?'

Charlie locked eyes with Alex. He could tell from the look on her face that she was thinking the same thing he was, but he couldn't share his thoughts with Richmond. 'He'll be fine.'

They crossed the stream, stepping on the line of rocks that protruded out of the water. They called out Derkein's name but each time got no reply. As the clouds gathered overhead, the forest became darker, and it started to drizzle.

The trio searched for thirty minutes, but as the light rain turned into a downpour, they called it a day.

As soon as Charlie and Richmond arrived back at Jacob's house, they changed out of their wet clothes and into dry ones.

'What's that mark on the back of your neck?' Richmond asked.

'Oh, it's a birthmark.'

'Kinda looks like a star. I thought it was a tattoo.'

Charlie laughed. 'I don't think I'm old enough for a tattoo. Besides, I hate needles.'

'Me too.'

Charlie flopped down onto his bed, exhausted from the battering rain.

'Do you think Derkein will come back?' Richmond asked.

A terrible thought entered Charlie's mind: *if he lives through the night*. 'Yeah, he'll come back.'

'Can I show you something?'

'Uh-huh.'

'You promise not to tell anyone?'

Charlie rose up onto his elbows. 'I promise.'

Richmond sat on the bed. Turning his back to Charlie, he pulled his shirt up.

Charlie gasped and sat up. Slashed across Richmond's back were scars, overlapping like a noughts and crosses board. 'Did your foster parents do this?' he asked, aghast.

Richmond pulled his shirt back down. ‘Not the ones I have now.’

‘That’s why you ran away, isn’t it? You thought it was going to happen again.’

Richmond nodded. After a moment, he asked, ‘You’re afraid of Jacob, aren’t you?’

Charlie looked away. ‘A little,’ he admitted. In truth, Jacob’s violent outbursts and the sheer size of the man was intimidating – and not to forget his promise to set aside a coffin for Charlie.

‘But you didn’t run away.’

‘Trust me, I tried.’

‘I don’t want to go back,’ Richmond said. ‘They won’t find me this time.’

Charlie looked at him, wondering how many times he had run away. Two weeks on the run was a long time, especially when he had nowhere to go. He couldn’t imagine hiding Richmond under his bed much longer. Who knew what Jacob would do if he found out. He didn’t want Charlie there much less another kid.

A full minute passed before Charlie asked, ‘You hungry?’

Richmond jumped up. ‘Starving.’ Food was the one thing guaranteed to lift his mood.

They left the room in a hurry, returning with cereal and leftover macaroni and cheese.

‘What happened to your parents?’ Charlie mumbled through his stuffed mouth. He and Richmond were sitting on the floor, watching TV. ‘How did they ... die?’

‘Car crash,’ Richmond replied. ‘I was in the car when it happened.’

‘How old were you?’

‘Five.’ Richmond ate a few spoonfuls of his cereal.

‘Are you an only child?’

Richmond shook his head. ‘I had a brother. He died in the crash too.’

‘How old was he?’

‘Eight.’

‘Do you remember them?’

Richmond shook his head. Before he looked away, Charlie thought he saw his eyes glisten. He wanted to tell Richmond that it was better he didn’t remember, for it would save him the heartache of all those good memories of a life he could never get back. Then he thought of his mum, how much he wished he had met her. He realised that no amount of words would make Richmond feel better. ‘Don’t you have any relatives?’ Charlie asked.

‘My mum has a brother, but I don’t know him.’ There was a different tone in his voice when he said, ‘Guess he didn’t want me.’

Charlie nudged him. ‘No offence, but he’s an idiot.’

‘Yeah, who needs him.’ Richmond smiled, but Charlie saw the disappointment in his eyes. ‘Do you have any relatives?’ He couldn’t hide the disappointment in his voice either.

‘No. My parents had no siblings, and my grandparents are dead – on both sides.’ Charlie lifted a

spoonful of macaroni and cheese to his mouth and paused, his eyes flashing to the door. 'Did you hear something?' He glanced at Richmond, who shook his head.

Seconds later, they heard a door slam.

Panicked, Richmond handed the half-empty cereal bowl to Charlie and scuttled under the bed. Charlie started to clear away when his bedroom door opened. He froze, three dishes clasped in his hands.

Jacob looked at him with contempt, but it had nothing to do with the mess. He had adapted that expression ever since Charlie discovered his true nature. It was becoming a permanent fixture on his face. 'Clean up and meet me downstairs,' he said. 'It's time to meet the father-in-law.'

Perhaps it was because he was now so busy, what with having three new friends and rushing around trying to find the mysterious Mr. Wakeman, but Charlie couldn't believe it when he realised he'd already been in Capeton two months. And in those months, his life had gone from one confusion to another. But one thing was certain: nothing would ever be the same again.

Situated in the town of Knotsbridge, a thirty-minute drive from Capeton, Willowdrop Care Home looked like something out of The Adams Family with its Victorian-style exterior, surrounded by its own woodland alongside the River Ern. The inside was

enormous. A few people wearing the same blue uniforms greeted Jacob with warm welcomes as he made his way to the reception desk.

‘Evening, Jacob,’ a young woman behind the desk greeted him, beaming. Her glasses had such thick lenses it appeared as if her eyes were popping out of her head. She did not stop grinning. She was either elated to see Jacob or on something. Either way, it put a smile on Charlie’s face.

‘Felicity my dear,’ Jacob said, extending an equally warm welcome. ‘Always a pleasure.’

Felicity’s eyes fixed on Charlie. ‘This must be the famous Charlie you’ve been telling us about.’

‘Ah, yes, this here is my boy.’ Jacob gave Charlie a forced smile, which Charlie returned.

After the uncomfortable pretences, Felicity escorted them down a large, dimly lit hallway and along the left corridor with rooms on both sides. Apart from the overbearing antiseptic smell and the stains on the carpeted floor, the place was clean.

They came to a half-open brown door. Felicity knocked and pushed it open. ‘Tom,’ she said in a cheerful voice. ‘Look who’s here to see you.’

‘Send him away,’ a frail voice croaked. ‘He’s poison.’

Felicity stepped aside to let them in. Jacob entered, but Charlie lingered by the doorway, casting his gaze around the green room. It was plain but cosy; a small bathroom on the right, a wall-mounted TV opposite a single bed, a chest of drawers in the far corner and two fern green armchairs on either side of

the bed. He spotted Tom sitting up in bed, his face turned towards the window.

‘Don’t let him scare you,’ Felicity whispered to Charlie. ‘He’s harmless.’ She winked at him and left the room.

‘Don’t linger all day,’ Jacob complained. He hauled Charlie into the room, closed the door, and then walked over to the nearest armchair and sat down.

Charlie walked around the bed, his gaze on the floor, and sat in the armchair by the window. When he looked behind him, he saw Tom’s long face turned towards him, and he shuddered. A thick scar ran from Tom’s right temple into his wild beard.

‘I have a picture you can have.’ Tom smiled, but it was devoid of humour.

Charlie turned away.

‘Thomas, Charlie, Charlie, Thomas,’ Jacob said. ‘Now we’re one big happy family.’ He shot them a cold, lifeless grin and started flicking through the TV channels.

For the next few minutes, no one said a single word. The only sounds came from the flickering TV, the ticking clock on the wall and the birds in the immaculate garden beyond the window.

Jacob got up. ‘I’ll be back in a moment. Don’t you two go whispering behind my back now,’ he said with a sneer. Once he left the room, Charlie got up and looked out the window. He could feel Tom’s gaze burning into him.

‘I see how you avoid him,’ Tom said. ‘You don’t trust him one bit. Got you doing his dirty work, has

he?’

Curious, Charlie looked at him.

‘Ah, there it is,’ Tom said. ‘Shame.’

Charlie’s stomach churned. ‘I’m not like him.’

Tom studied him a moment, his eyes filled with an expression of weariness and guard. He looked to be in his eighties, with a receding hairline, high cheekbones over gaunt, hollow cheeks and a full grey beard. ‘Then leave before you become him, or worse. You don’t want to end up like my daughter.’ His eyes flickered to the chest of drawers, where Charlie spotted a line of framed pictures of various sizes – the largest and most colourful one showing a young woman with long, wavy red locks, wearing a yellow apron, surrounded by an array of flowers.

‘Beautiful, isn’t she,’ Tom said. ‘She was all I had until he took her from me.’

Charlie looked back at him. ‘She fell down the stairs.’

Tom grunted. ‘She didn’t fall. He pushed her when she finally found out what he was up to, sneaking out the house at night. He won’t even let the dead rest in peace. He’s evil. Anyone who tries to poison their stepfather and stepbrother has to be.’

A shiver ran down Charlie’s spine, and he stared at Tom, unblinking.

‘Oh, he hasn’t told you about that,’ Tom went on. ‘Lucky for them, they found out what he was up to and threw him out. You might not be so fortunate.’

Charlie knew how vicious Jacob was, but a murderer ... He found it hard to believe. Still, he may

now think twice before accepting food from the man. 'Why would he poison them?'

'Because he couldn't stand the truth. He didn't want to accept that his precious mother was nothing more than a conniving con artist who made her living deceiving wealthy men. She was a thief. Like mother, like son. She got her punishment though, the little witch. Married a dying man and ended up dying herself. Ironic, isn't it?'

Charlie shook his head in disbelief. 'He wouldn't do that.'

'So he'd have you believe. He can be very convincing when he wants something. He had me fooled. I couldn't have been more shocked when I found out what he really was. He stole from me ...' Tom's voice trailed off, and he looked out the window. 'I had me a beautiful set of jewels. The best kind – not something you can buy in a shop.' He looked back at Charlie. 'They were for my little girl.' His expression turned hard. 'After taking everything from me, he had the audacity to throw me out of my daughter's house. He'll get what's coming to him. Mark my words.'

Charlie didn't know what to say. He didn't know what to believe. Desperate to get away from Tom's probing gaze, he turned around and headed across the room. Just as he was about to leave, he spotted the brass nameplate at the top of the door and stopped.

Perhaps because he couldn't believe his eyes, he blinked twice. Suddenly, his trip to Willowdrop didn't seem at all pointless anymore, and all because of two words: THOMAS WAKEMAN.

Charlie burst back into the room. ‘*You’re* Thomas Wakeman?’ he asked in shock.

Tom looked at him. ‘Last time I checked.’

Charlie laughed. ‘Oh my god.’ He started pacing in front of the bed. ‘This is not happening. Derkein isn’t going to believe this.’

‘What on earth are you going on about?’

Charlie stopped pacing. ‘I’ve been looking for you – well, not me, a friend of mine. His name is Derkein Odessa.’ Although Tom’s wrinkled face revealed no emotion, there seemed the slightest change in his huge, piercing hazel eyes. Possibly some sort of recognition. ‘Do you know George Odessa?’

Tom sat up slowly. ‘What is this about?’

Charlie glanced at the open door and then went over and closed it. Walking back to the bed, he said, ‘Derkein needs your help.’

‘Who’s Derkein?’

‘He’s George’s son.’

‘George has a son?’ Tom spoke more to himself than to Charlie. ‘What’s wrong with him?’

‘He’s old – well, he’s not actually old, he just looks it. He’s twenty-seven years old, but he looks like he’s going on sixty. He gets older every day.’

The first sign of emotion appeared on Tom’s face: confusion. ‘Why didn’t George come to me himself?’ Tom’s tone sounded suspicious.

‘He’s missing.’

Tom sucked in a shocked breath. ‘Missing? What happened?’

‘Something attacked him and Derkein a few

weeks ago, and then Derkein started ageing. George gave him a talisman he found in Brazil that we think saved Derkein's life.'

'What was George doing in Brazil?'

'Something about a place called Arcadia.'

Tom's eyes widened.

'So it's true,' said Charlie. 'You really think it exists.'

'I don't think it exists, I know it does.' Tom watched Charlie with a thoughtful expression. 'This talisman you claim saved Derkein's life. Where is it?'

'Derkein has it.'

'I need to see it –' Tom began, but the sound of the door opening cut him off.

Charlie glanced around and saw Jacob, who had just entered the room. Scrutinising Tom and Charlie, Jacob smiled and said, 'Someone's been telling porkies again.' He walked across the room and grabbed his coat off the armchair. 'Well, Tom, as always, it's been a pleasure.' He headed past Charlie, who remained where he was.

'Charlie,' Tom whispered. Charlie went over to him. 'The talisman –'

'Charlie,' said Jacob, who was standing in the doorway, a fierce look on his face.

Charlie turned back to Tom, and in a low voice, he said, 'Tomorrow.'

CHAPTER SIX



What Lies Beneath

ALLEX DIDN'T GET ON the bus the following day. Charlie wondered if she had gone back to find Derkein. He thought about bunking off, but the last thing he wanted was Jacob on his case, so, after school, he got off the bus at Brick Lane, a narrow road leading to a white house with many colourful flowers in the front garden.

He rang the doorbell. Seconds later, the door opened, and a tiny woman stood before him. She was wearing a watermelon-print apron, holding a chocolate-covered spatula in her hand. Black strands of hair drooped from her brown mesh hairnet. Apart from being a tad darker than Alex – attributable to her

Colombian heritage – the resemblance between mother and daughter was uncanny.

‘Hello,’ Mrs. Dench said with a smile.

‘Hi,’ Charlie said, cautiously eyeing the spatula.
‘I’m Charlie –’

‘Charlie! Well, this is a lovely surprise. I’m Alex’s mum, Maria. Come in.’

He entered into a large foyer with a high ceiling and a curved wooden stairway on the left. The peach-painted walls gave the house a warm and cosy feel.

‘We meet at last,’ Mrs. Dench said, her English accented. ‘Alex has told me so much about you.’

Charlie smiled, wondering why he hadn’t heard much about her.

‘Here, let me take this.’ Mrs. Dench took his coat and bag, and as she hung them on the coat rack, the spatula fell from her hand and landed on the wooden floor. ‘Oh bollocks,’ she squealed, smacking herself across the head.

Charlie’s eyes widened. After an awkward pause, he picked the spatula up and held on to it, unsure of what to do.

Mrs. Dench gave him a sheepish smile. ‘Here.’ She took the spatula from him. ‘You don’t want to get all messy like me – please don’t tell Alex I said a bad word.’

‘Er, o-okay.’

Mrs. Dench beckoned him down the hallway, past the living room on the right, and into a large modern kitchen fitted with walnut units and steel appliances.

Charlie paused in the doorway, his gaze drifting

over what looked like the aftermath of a battle. It was as if a bomb had gone off in the room, but the warm, sweet smell made up for the mess. It reminded him of the way his kitchen used to look after his dad finished cooking.

‘Sorry about the mess,’ Mrs. Dench said. ‘I’m always baking. Do you like chocolate cake?’ Charlie nodded. ‘It’s your lucky day. I don’t know why it’s taken Alex so long to invite you around. She talks about you all the time. Maybe you can stay for dinner, that way you can meet my husband – he’s a photographer so he travels a lot, but you probably already know that. He should be here soon. You know, you’re the first friend of Alex’s that has come around in a long time.’

Charlie smiled. He remembered the first time he met Alex. It was obvious from which parent she had inherited her long-windedness.

‘Mum,’ Alex called as she descended the stairs. ‘Who was at the door ...?’ She broke off when she saw Charlie standing in the kitchen doorway. Shock flooded her face.

‘Look who stopped by, dear.’ Mrs. Dench appeared behind Charlie. ‘He came to check on you. Isn’t that sweet?’ She stroked Charlie’s head.

Alex’s eyes widened. ‘Mamá, ¿qué estás haciendo?’ she hissed. ‘Él no es una mascota.’

It was the first time Charlie was hearing her speak Spanish. He chuckled at her disgruntled tone.

‘Sólo estoy diciendo,’ Mrs. Dench said as she retreated into the kitchen. ‘Él la pena mantener,’ she

called out in a singsong voice.

Alex patted down her dishevelled hair as she approached Charlie. 'Hi.'

'Hey,' Charlie said.

They stood staring at each other for a moment.

'You're ... in my house.'

'Is it okay that I'm here?'

'Yeah, sure, it's just ... I'm just surprised.'

'You didn't come to school, so I thought I'd come see if you were okay.'

'Oh, yeah. I had the sniffles, so my mum refused to let me out.' Alex inched closer to Charlie and whispered, 'Don't ever sneeze or cough in front of my mother.'

'Food, glorious food,' Mrs. Dench sang, 'hot sausage and mustard.'

Glancing over his shoulder, Charlie saw her dancing along to her song.

'She loves musicals,' Alex explained. 'Mum.' Alex just about screamed at her. 'We're going to my room.'

'Okay, dear, but you two behave,' Mrs. Dench said in her musical voice.

Alex rolled her eyes, pulling Charlie's arm as she led him away. 'I'm sorry you had to see that,' she said as they headed upstairs. 'She didn't say anything weird, did she?'

'No. Why?'

'Well, she's a little ... eccentric.'

'Is that why you never invite your friends around?'

Alex didn't respond. They got to the top of the stairs and headed left along the landing, entering a

large, messy pink room with a double bed and two wardrobes.

Charlie gasped. ‘Oh my god. You’re a girl!’

Alex punched him. ‘Shut up. It’s been like this since forever. I can’t be asked to paint over it.’ She picked up a pile of clothes off the floor and tossed them aside. ‘You’ve probably figured out by now that I don’t have many friends. I used to. It’s just that they always laughed at her. I think you’re my first real friend – not that I have imaginary friends or anything – well, apart from that one time when I was five ...’ She stopped talking when she noticed Charlie staring at her, his brow puckered. They went over to the bed and sat down.

‘You thought I’d laugh if I met your mum, didn’t you?’ Charlie asked.

‘No, I know you’re not like that. It’s just ... My mum’s bipolar.’

‘What’s that?’

‘It’s a brain disorder. She’s often depressed and has different moods, so you never know what to expect. She’s on medication, but it can get out of hand sometimes.’ Alex looked down at the floor.

‘Hey.’ Charlie took hold of her hand. ‘I like your mum. She’s nice. You think she’s strange? You should have seen my dad when he ran around the house impersonating animals.’ Alex grinned. ‘Talk about embarrassing.’ He noticed he was still holding Alex’s hand and dropped it.

An awkward silence followed, broken only by the sound of banging pots and Mrs. Dench yelling:

‘Everything’s fine.’

They exchanged glances, smiling.

‘What were you laughing at downstairs?’ Alex asked.

‘I wasn’t laughing.’

‘Yes, you were. Was it my Spanish? Did I sound weird or something?’

‘Oh, no, it wasn’t that. I was just laughing at what you said about me not being a pet.’

Alex looked at Charlie in shock. ‘Since when do you speak Spanish?’

‘I don’t speak Spanish. I only know a few words.’

Alex’s eyes widened, and her face flushed. ‘Please tell me you didn’t understand what my mum said.’

Charlie half smiled. ‘No clue,’ he said.

Alex studied him, her eyes narrowing. ‘How do you even know Spanish anyway?’

Charlie shrugged. ‘I don’t know. I used to watch a lot of international game shows when I was little – at least, that’s what my dad told me. I guess I picked up a few things.’

‘That explains how you aced last month’s French test.’

‘I told you that was a fluke. Someone else’s paper obviously got mixed up with mine.’ No matter how many times Charlie told himself that, the truth was that he had understood every part of that test. ‘Sometimes people just get lucky.’

‘An A plus,’ Alex mused. ‘Wow. Can I borrow some of your luck?’ She smiled, which Charlie returned. ‘Here’s me thinking Derkein was the weirdo.’

It was then Charlie remembered why he was there. 'You'll never guess who I found.'

The inquisitive look on Alex's face lasted only a fraction of a second before she exclaimed, 'Shut up!' She jumped up. 'You found Thomas Wakeman?'

Charlie nodded.

'Where?' Alex enquired.

'This is going to sound a little strange, but, um ... He's Jacob's father-in-law.'

Alex's jaw dropped, and she blinked. 'What!'

'I know. What are the odds, right?'

'What did he say?'

'He seriously believes Arcadia exists.'

'You mean ...' Alex pointed at the floor.

Charlie nodded. 'I'm taking Derkein to see him ...' His voice trailed off. Alex had a faraway look in her eyes. He got up. 'Are you even listening?'

'It's strange,' Alex said, as if he hadn't spoken. 'You dreamt about Derkein, and now you've found Thomas, who just happens to be Jacob's father-in-law.'

Charlie wasn't sure if she was referring to him being strange or the situation. 'What's your point?' he asked.

'It's just ... What *are* the odds?'

Ch Charlie sat on the windowsill, watching Tom, who was gawking at Derkein's face. Tom's expression was half intrigued and half anxious. 'Remarkable,' he breathed. 'And you say it happened after the attack?'

‘Yes,’ replied Derkein, who was sitting in the armchair on the opposite side of the bed to Charlie, his back to the door. ‘I’m sure this change is attributable to the talisman my father gave me.’ He removed the talisman from around his neck and handed it to Tom.

‘The four elements,’ Tom muttered. ‘The root of all existing matter. Many cultures regard these elements as powerful forces keeping balance in the world. Many people, though, associate them with witchcraft.’ He paused, thinking. ‘If this talisman holds magical qualities, then it must have been what they were after. You said George found it in Brazil?’

‘He and a friend did, yes.’ A sad expression crept across Derkein’s face.

‘I take it that something happened to this friend.’

‘He died. Doctors said it was a heart attack, but my father thought otherwise.’

‘Hmm ... After what happened to you, it’s very likely your friend didn’t die of a heart attack. If whoever attacked him was after the talisman, then they’re still looking for it.’

‘By *they* you mean the people of Arcadia.’

‘You don’t believe it exists.’ Tom sounded disappointed.

‘I don’t know what I believe anymore. All I know is that my father spent years searching for this place because he had a crazy idea that he could bring my mother back from the dead. An idea he got from you.’ Charlie detected a hint of accusation in Derkein’s tone.

‘And I suppose you’re wondering how that’s

possible.’ Tom leaned back in his bed. ‘My great-grandfather, Arthur Hill, was working in the Mammoth Cave in Kentucky in the 1840s. One day, he disappeared while exploring new regions of the cave. Almost two months later, he reappeared inside the same cave, having no idea how he arrived there. He told folks that something had attacked him and had taken him to another world.’ Tom paused, as if waiting for them to say something, but when they didn’t, he went on, ‘He said this other world was called Arcadia, and that it was located at the centre of the earth. The creatures that had taken him he described as wolves, only larger.’

A thought popped into Charlie’s head: *werewolves*.

‘Are you saying these things aren’t human?’ Derkein asked.

‘Far from it,’ said Tom. ‘They can appear in either human or animal form. I was sceptical at first. These were the accounts of a man who went crazy and committed suicide, mind you. Not only did he claim that mythological creatures had abducted him, he also said that he had only been in Arcadia for three days, but when he resurfaced, he found almost two months had passed.’

‘Are we talking about another dimension here?’

‘So it appears.’

‘How can people not know about a world that exists below us?’ Charlie asked, his tone somewhere between disbelief and curiosity.

Tom replied, ‘People are sceptical about the existence of alternate dimensions let alone one at the

centre of our planet. I didn't believe it at first. But Arthur, he knew the truth. He saw it. He went back to the cave, but he never found the entrance. For a time, he travelled the world, searching for the gateway to Arcadia, and it drove him insane.' Tom closed his eyes. When he opened them again, they were watery. 'My father took a great interest in his story. He was adamant that Arthur was telling the truth, so he went about trying to find an entrance to prove that Arthur wasn't crazy.'

'Did your dad find it?' Charlie asked.

'I don't know. He disappeared in 1937, when I was ten years old. I never saw him again. He travelled the world, seeking out places with strange events – people disappearing, multiple deaths in a single town, strange lights appearing in the sky ... My father didn't believe in coincidences. He was here in West Sussex when he went missing, and at the time, this county was experiencing strange happenings.'

'What do you think happened to him?' Derkein asked.

'I think he found an entrance.'

'But how can you prove it?' There was that scepticism in Charlie's voice again.

Tom braced his hands on the sides of his bed and sat forward. Using one hand, he lifted his jumper and shirt halfway up his torso.

Charlie froze.

Across Tom's stomach were deep, aged slashes. It was a painful sight. The scars were a reminder and a remainder of a traumatic event. Tom covered the scars

with his jumper and sat back.

‘Who did that to you?’ Charlie asked.

‘I know you’ve been looking at my face, wondering what happened. Forty years ago, I had an encounter with two Arcadians while I was looking into the death of a church congregation in Mongolia. It was by some miracle I survived. To this day, I’m uncertain why I’m still alive. Perhaps they thought I was dead. These creatures are vicious. They walk among us every day without our knowledge. They could be anyone.’

A short silence followed.

‘Do you have any idea how to reverse what’s happening to me?’ Derkein asked.

‘I’m afraid I don’t,’ said Tom.

Derkein leaned forward, lowering his head.

‘There was a story Arthur heard while he was in Arcadia,’ Tom went on, ‘about a place called Eden.’ Derkein’s head snapped up. ‘You know of the Garden of Eden. Some believe the Great Flood of Noah destroyed it. They’re wrong. The garden never existed on the surface. It lies within the earth.’

Derkein sat up. ‘Let me get this straight. You’re telling me that the Garden of Eden where God placed Adam and Eve is at the centre of the earth.’

‘If the story is true, then, yes. It’s where it has always been and where it is today.’

Charlie could tell from the look on Derkein’s face that he was finding what Tom was saying hard to believe.

‘Even if that is the truth,’ Derkein said, ‘what

does it have to do with my father suddenly thinking he can raise the dead?’

Tom glanced at Charlie and pointed at the chest of drawers. ‘Can you open the top drawer and take out the journal inside?’ Charlie got up and opened the drawer, taking out an old brown leather journal, which he handed to Tom. ‘Mother claimed my father had a hereditary mental illness. She said my grandfather and great-grandfather had the same illness – believing in things that didn’t exist. I found this journal ten years after my father disappeared. It belonged to Arthur, though my father and I added details of our own. Everything I know about Arcadia, I learned from this.’ He held the journal close to his chest.

‘I caught George reading it one night while he was staying with me,’ Tom continued. ‘It seems the section about the Tree of Life intrigued him more than he had let on.’

‘The Tree of Life!’ Charlie almost screamed the words.

Tom half smiled at his enthusiasm. ‘Have you ever heard of the word Sephirah?’

‘The name sounds familiar,’ Derkein said. ‘My dad probably mentioned it at one point, but I can’t say I know what it means.’

‘It’s what the Arcadians call the Tree of Life,’ Tom said. ‘Arthur had overheard his captors talking about it. They claim that whoever finds Sephirah gets their heart’s deepest desire.’

‘What, you mean like a wish?’ Charlie enquired.

‘Arthur didn’t elaborate, but your guess is as good

as mine.’

This news stirred something inside Charlie that made his heart swell. It was a good feeling.

Tom untied the cord around the journal and opened it. ‘Of course, when I read the journal, I considered the possibility that my father had been crazy. That was before I started visiting some of the places he had been to. Back in 1966, my search took me to West Virginia, and it was there that I had my first encounter with a monster. Folks had reported sightings of a huge creature with large wings and red eyes. They called it the Mothman. Many disasters happened around the time it appeared, and many people died. I would have been one of the casualties had it not been for my steel knife. It seems copper and steel are the only things that can fatally wound Arcadians.’ He looked down at the journal. ‘My father saved my life. I stabbed the creature in the chest, and it burst into dust, leaving no evidence it ever existed.

‘There were many caves and tunnels in the area, but I never found an entrance. That’s when I considered something neither Arthur nor my father had mentioned. The entrance to Arcadia must be some sort of gateway that opens and closes, which would explain why it’s so hard to find. With all the strange happenings around the world, I have cause to believe there is more than one gateway.’

Tom flicked through a few pages in the journal. He stopped and laid it open on his lap. Charlie tried to read the words on the pages, but the writing was difficult to decipher.

‘Arthur first disappeared on March 20, 1844,’ Tom said. ‘My mother and I last heard from my father on December 25, 1937.’ He looked at Derkein and Charlie as if the dates should have meant something to them. ‘Don’t you see? The spring equinox was on March 20, and my father disappeared three days after the winter solstice. The gateway opens on equinoxes and solstices.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Charlie.

‘An equinox occurs twice a year,’ Tom explained, ‘when the sun is exactly over the equator, resulting in both halves of the earth getting roughly the same amount of sunlight. In other words, equal day and night. A solstice also occurs twice a year, when the sun is at the greatest distance from the equator. It’s the days of the year with the longest and shortest periods of light.’

‘So the gateway opens four times a year,’ Derkein said.

‘Exactly. The elements constitute different phases of the sun’s cyclic activity. When these four phases – the equinoxes and solstices – are activated, the gateway opens.’ Tom flicked through the journal again. Attached to some of the pages were newspaper clippings detailing tragic events all over the globe. ‘People disappearing three days in a row, storms hitting a few cities in one state, mass murder, traffic collisions ... They all occur over a period of time and then suddenly stop.’ He stopped on a page with a tally chart. There were four columns, but only three had headings: event, first report, last report. In the last

column, the one without a heading, Charlie saw *Full Moon* written for almost every event on the page.

'Many of these events ended around the time of a full moon,' said Tom. 'I think that's when the gateways close.' He glanced at the calendar on the wall opposite the window. 'It's March 22.' He locked eyes with Derkein, who Charlie noticed was wearing the same unnerved expression as Tom. 'The spring equinox was on March 20.'

Charlie now understood. 'Wait, doesn't that mean —?'

'Yes,' Tom cut in. 'The gateways are open.'

Monday, March 25, three days since Charlie and Derkein visited Thomas, and since then, the gang had been on panic alert. The gateways had been open for six days, and they had no clue where the entrances were. It was nearing six in the evening when they arrived at the shack.

'How are we supposed to find it when the compass needle spins everywhere we go?' Richmond asked, frustrated. They were sitting on the cardboard bed, a pizza box open in front of them. 'How do we know we haven't passed it?'

'We don't,' Derkein said. 'We have to accept that we may never find it.'

'But we have to —'

'I know.' Derkein's voice sounded strained. He took a deep breath and, in a calmer voice, repeated, 'I

know.’

‘We still have two days before the full moon,’ Alex said. ‘The compass acting up is a good sign. Thomas said it did the same thing when he was in those places where strange events occurred, so it has to be because of the gateway.’

Charlie opened his bag and pulled out a map of the village of Woolpit, laying it on his lap. ‘There are twelve caves in the Woolpit Gorge. We’ve searched five and found nothing. We have to get into the rest of them, and we have to do it now.’

‘But they don’t allow visitors inside the other caves,’ Richmond reminded him.

‘That’s why we have to go at night,’ Charlie said.

‘What about tonight?’ Alex suggested.

‘No,’ Derkein said. ‘I’m not taking you into the caves at night. It’s too dangerous.’

Charlie folded the map, placed it back inside his bag, and took out a pocket-sized golden compass. ‘It’s not as if we have any other option.’

‘You guys have already missed a day of school. It’s not that I don’t appreciate what you’re doing, but —’

‘School can wait,’ Alex interjected. ‘This is a time sensitive matter. If we don’t find the entrance, we’ll have to wait until the summer solstice for the gateways to open again. That’s three months from now. You don’t have three months.’

Charlie wasn’t paying attention to their dispute. He was looking at the compass, the needle spinning clockwise, making one rotation in five seconds. ‘It’s

spinning faster,' he muttered under his breath.

'What was that?' Derkein asked.

'The needle's spinning faster than when we were inside the caves.'

'Okay, so what does that mean?' Richmond asked.

'It either means we have a broken compass and we have to start over again,' Derkein said, 'or Tom's theory was just that – a theory.'

Charlie said, 'Or maybe the entrance is closer than we think. As in Capeton.'

'There are no caves in Capeton,' Alex said.

Charlie paused, thinking. 'None that we know of.' The others regarded him with curiosity. 'Think about it. Arcadia is inside the earth, hidden where no one can see it. What if there are hidden caves in Capeton?'

'If there are, how are we supposed to find them?' Alex asked.

Charlie looked down at the compass. 'If the needle spins faster the closer we get to the gateway, I say we follow it.' His gaze flickered to Derkein. He didn't want to be the decision maker, especially if he turned out to be wrong. 'What do you think?'

Derkein was silent for a moment, his hands fidgeting – a direct conflict to his poker face. He looked up at the ceiling, his expression becoming thoughtful. There was a twinkle in his eyes when he looked back at the trio. 'My dad used to say that life was all about taking chances. If it wasn't for you' – he locked eyes with Charlie – 'I wouldn't be where I am now. At this point, we have nothing to lose. So let's do it. Let's see where the compass leads us.'

CHAPTER SEVEN



The Hidden Drawer

HEARING FOOTSTEPS ON THE stairs, Charlie lay still in bed, his face turned to the wall. It had just gone ten, and he and Richmond had only made it home an hour ago. His bedroom door squeaked as it opened and then closed again. He listened as Jacob's footsteps retreated down the hallway and then turned over onto his back. Rolling onto his stomach, he hung over the side of the bed and peeked under it. He just about made out Richmond's form in the darkness.

'You okay?' he whispered.

'Yeah,' Richmond whispered back. 'I can't wait to search for the gateway tomorrow. I think we'll find it.'

'I hope so.'

'Maybe you can use your psychic powers.'

Charlie smiled. 'I'll work on it. 'Night.'

'Night.'

Lying on his back, Charlie stared into the darkness, his mind wandering. He still could not fathom the fact that Thomas Wakeman was Jacob's father-in-law. It was strange enough that he had dreamt about Derkein, but now this. He didn't know what to think anymore. All he knew was that if they didn't find the gateway before it closed, at the rate Derkein was ageing, he wouldn't be around much longer. His eyelids started to flutter, and sleep eventually overcame him.

That night, Charlie had a dream.

He was standing in a misty forest, and all he could hear was his own breathing. Feeling a light pressure on his right shoulder, as if someone had touched him, he looked around but saw no one. The sound of footsteps disrupted the silence, and he jumped when a shadow ran past him.

'Charlie.' He recognised Derkein's voice but couldn't see him.

Another shadow ran past him, whispering, 'It's coming.'

Charlie followed its direction, the sweet smell of nature familiar and welcoming. Soon, he came to an open glade. Although mist swamped the area, he could still see what was before him. It was a graveyard.

As he sauntered through the graveyard, his eyes sweeping over the surrounding gravestones, he felt as if there was an unseen presence with him, guiding

him. He finally halted in front of a black granite gravestone with no inscriptions.

Feeling the hairs on the back of his neck prickle, he quivered and spun around.

‘Charlie,’ someone whispered behind him.

He turned back around and gasped. It was Derkein, but younger – the face from the passport – standing inches in front of him.

‘What, no flowers?’ Derkein said with a smile.

Charlie shot a wary glance around the graveyard. ‘What are we doing here?’

‘You can’t save everyone, Charlie.’

‘What are you talking about?’

Suddenly, familiar faces appeared around him: Richmond, Alex, Jacob, Ms. Trent, Josh, Damzel, Carla, Rebecca, Mrs. Dench ... There were other faces too. Charlie spun in a circle.

‘It’s coming,’ Derkein said. ‘You can’t stop it.’

Charlie looked at him. ‘What’s coming?’

‘The end.’ At that moment, the earth opened and swallowed Derkein.

‘No!’ Charlie dropped down on his hands and knees and started digging. Looking up, he cried, ‘Someone, help ...’ He stopped digging. The people had disappeared, replaced by gravestones.

The graveyard seemed endless.

A low, rumbling growl reverberated in Charlie’s ears. Looking down, he saw two glowing red eyes staring at him through the dirt. Then two human-like furry hands with sharp claws burst out of the ground, grabbed his arms, and pulled him in –

Charlie jerked upright in bed. His eyes were wet with tears. It was still dark outside, and from the sound of the rolling thunder, a storm was brewing. He tried to make sense of his dream, but as his eyes adjusted to the dark, he became aware of a figure in his room, standing by the chest of drawers.

Assuming it was Jacob, he sighed. 'What now?' When he got no reply, a sense of dread came over him, and in a quick flash, he switched his bedside lamp on.

A strong wind whipped around the room, and Charlie sheltered his eyes with his hands, his hair blowing wildly about his head. Once the wind ceased, he opened his eyes and saw that the figure had vanished. He would have thought he had imagined it, but the evidence lay in the pieces of paper flying around the room.

'Candra,' he breathed. With all that had happened lately, he had almost forgotten her until now. He found, to his surprise, that he was more curious than fearful. He was certain she had controlled the wind, just as she had done the night he had tried to escape. Knowing now that she wasn't the product of his imagination, there could only be one other explanation: *she's Arcadian!*

A clicking sound distracted Charlie from the paper storm, and he looked at the door. Jacob was standing in the doorway, that disdainful look on his face. 'Get dressed,' he demanded.

Charlie looked up at the clock; it was nearing midnight. 'What for?' he asked, but he knew well what

the man was talking about.

‘You bloody well know what for.’

‘No.’ Charlie’s voice was low, his eyes cast towards the floor, but he spoke with firm conviction. ‘I’m not doing it.’

Jacob stepped into the room and flicked the light switch on. Charlie blinked, momentarily blind. ‘You’ll do as I say.’

‘My dad didn’t raise me to be a thief.’

‘Your dad stopped raising you when he dropped dead.’

Charlie fixed him with an angry glare. ‘I won’t do it.’

As if he had lost twenty pounds off his frame, Jacob dashed across the room and lunged at him, pinning him to the bed with his thick arms. ‘You listen to me,’ he spat. ‘You will do as I tell you, do I make myself –?’ He broke off in a cry of pain and backed away from Charlie, hopping on one foot.

Richmond emerged from under the bed. ‘Leave him alone.’

Jacob stared at him in stunned disbelief. ‘What the ...?’ He rubbed the part of his foot where Richmond had kicked him. ‘You have a stray sleeping under my roof.’

‘He’s not a stray,’ Charlie retorted.

‘I see what’s going on here. Think I’m dumb, do you? You brought him here so you two can steal my riches. Oh, I see what’s going on all right.’ Jacob’s face flushed red with fury.

Charlie stood up. ‘We don’t want your stupid

money.'

Jacob glared at Richmond. 'Get out of my house.' He lunged at Richmond, grabbed his arm, and pulled him towards the door. Charlie wedged himself between them, and Jacob released Richmond and grabbed hold of him instead, pushing him up against the door.

'You ungrateful brat,' Jacob spat.

'Rich, run,' Charlie yelled.

Jacob made a grab for Richmond as he dashed past him, but he missed, and Richmond disappeared down the stairs.

'Charlie, come on,' Richmond called.

'Go,' Charlie urged. He heard the door open, Richmond's footsteps fading as he ran off.

Jacob shoved Charlie inside the room and slammed the door shut, bolting it with a key. 'You've brought me nothing but trouble,' he yelled. 'I'll deal with you soon, boy. Nobody makes a fool of me.'

Charlie heard him stomp downstairs and leaned his back against the door. He thought about picking the lock but decided against it. If Jacob caught him, he'd be in more trouble.

As he stared at the papers scattered around his room, he noticed that the black box on top of the chest of drawers was open. It was then he realised the papers were his mother's letters.

Gathering all the letters, he placed them back inside the box. As he was about to close the lid, he saw it: the hidden drawer. He gazed at it with an odd combination of suspicion and curiosity. For four years,

he'd been in and out of the box, but he had never seen the front drawer.

Slowly, he pulled it open. Inside was an envelope. He saw his name written on the front and recognised his mum's handwriting. He took the envelope out and opened it.

My dearest Charlie,

I'm afraid this will be my last letter to you. First, let me say, I have never been more elated in my life than the day I found out I was pregnant with you. After learning that I could never have children, it was more than a miracle when I found out about you.

I don't believe in many things, but for the past three months, I have seen things that are beyond anything I could ever have imagined. I have had dreams ... about you. It scared me at first, but when I found out what was happening, I stopped being afraid for I realised the dreams were a gift. They were my gift for carrying you.

You are, as you by now might have suspected, different. The more you become aware of the world around you, the more you will start to see and feel things you won't understand at first. Be not afraid, my child. Trust your heart. Remember, we all have a purpose on this earth – a destiny to fulfil. It is up to us to make the right choices.

You are a precious soul, my son. I have seen all that you were, and it is up to you to be all that you can be. Know that you are not alone. Don't be afraid to follow your heart.

I love you. Till the day I die. And forever.

Mum

P.S. Arcadia awaits your return.

A loud bang echoed up to Charlie's bedroom and startled him. His eyes darted to the clock; it was five a.m. He had been sitting on the floor for the past five hours, re-reading the last letter his mother had written to him. He tried to make sense of it, but the more he thought about it, the more it unnerved him. *I have seen all that you were*, she had written. And how did she know about Arcadia? He wondered if he and his mum shared more than just DNA. Perhaps her dreams came true just as his did. It sure would explain the other two items that accompanied the letter.

At first, Charlie wasn't sure what to make of them. The first item was a logo depicting a tree growing out of an open book with the words **KNOWLEDGE IS POWER** written below it. The second item was an old map, which he didn't think much of at first, until he saw one word: Eden.

He tried to convince himself that there was no possible way he was in possession of a map of Arcadia, but no matter how many times he blinked or pinched himself, he was not dreaming.

Another bang distracted him, and he got off the floor and looked out the window. Through the pouring rain, he spotted Jacob hauling junk out of the garden shed. He ducked when Jacob looked up at his window. Looking out again, Charlie saw him with a shovel in his hand, and his pulse quickened. To his

relief, Jacob threw the shovel down among the heap of junk.

An hour flew by before the banging finally subsided. Charlie looked out the window. The rain was lighter now and had settled into a fine mist. He saw the pile of junk on the ground but no Jacob in sight. Then he heard banging downstairs. Jacob's silence was worse than his threats.

A soft tap at the window startled Charlie, and he looked out. He saw nothing. It couldn't have been Jacob, as he heard him downstairs. Besides, his custom was more bursting through doors than tapping on windows.

There was another tap, and Charlie saw something bounce off the window. When he looked out again, he saw two figures below and smiled.

It was Alex and Richmond. He had never been happier to see anyone. Now all he had to do was get out of the house unscathed.

On two occasions, he heard Jacob open the front door and curse before slamming it shut. Alex and Richmond were giving him a good workout. Charlie smiled as he kneeled in front of his bedroom door, picking the lock.

At last, the door opened. With his bag on his back, he tiptoed out of the room.

The doorbell rang again.

'Right. Let's see you make fun of me now,' he heard Jacob say.

Charlie listened to the man's heavy feet stomping towards the front door. Looking down the stairs, he

saw the door wide open, and he made his way down, heading towards the kitchen to make an exit out the back.

To Charlie's relief, the kitchen door was unlocked. Slowly, he pulled it open and stepped outside.

'Hey,' Alex whispered behind him, frightening him half to death.

Charlie breathed a faint sigh and closed the kitchen door. The three of them turned to leave but froze as a bright light blinded their eyes.

When the light lowered from their faces, they saw Jacob holding a torch and a double-barrelled shotgun, pointing it directly at them. 'Thought you'd be showing your face again,' he said to Richmond.

'You can't do anything to us,' Alex said.

'You're trespassing on private property. I'll have you know I can do whatever the hell I want,' Jacob said with a grim smile.

'Let them go,' Charlie pleaded.

'Shut it, boy. Move,' Jacob demanded.

Walking backwards, the trio moved towards the shed.

'You can't do this,' Alex cried.

'Get in,' Jacob said.

Alex and Richmond entered the shed while Charlie lingered in the doorway, his eyes on the shotgun grasped in Jacob's hands as if it were his life savings.

'Why are you doing this?' Charlie asked.

'I wasn't expecting this much company,' Jacob said, as if he hadn't spoken. 'It's a good thing I cleared

up. Get in.'

Charlie remained where he was, his body tensed, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. Jacob inched closer to him. Feeling a pressure on his arm, Charlie glanced behind him at Alex, her expression pleading. He relaxed his shoulders, looked back at Jacob, and retreated inside the shed.

'You'll be sorry,' Richmond warned.

Jacob laughed. 'What can a little runt like you do to me?' He padlocked the shed door, gazed at them through the rain-drenched window with a sinister smile, and then walked away.

'You shouldn't have come here,' Charlie said.

'As if we were going to leave you,' Alex said with a tremble in her voice.

Charlie started pacing between the door and the back wall of the shed. 'You don't know what he's like. He's not just evil, he's also crazy.'

Alex grabbed his hand, forcing him to stop. She tilted her head, studying him. 'You're hiding something.'

'No, I'm not.' Charlie's voice squeaked. He had decided not to tell them about Candra, his mother's letter, or the map, as he thought it would have been a sure-fire way to send them running – away from him.

'You have that look,' Alex observed. 'It's as if you're here but not really *here*.'

Charlie sighed. 'If I tell you, you'll think it's weird.'

'Charlie. We're searching for a world at the centre of the earth.'

Realising Alex had a point, Charlie took his bag off his shoulder, knelt down, and opened it. ‘My dad used to give me a letter and a gift from my mum every year, right up to my tenth birthday.’ He laid the bag’s contents out on the ground. There were two headtorches, a golden compass, a coil of rope and a handful of glow sticks.

‘I thought your mum died in childbirth,’ Alex said, puzzled.

‘She did.’ Charlie looked up at her. ‘It gets stranger. I found this in a box she left for my tenth birthday.’ He handed Alex the letter. ‘It was in a hidden drawer.’

Alex read the letter aloud. When she finished, she looked at Charlie. ‘Your mum wrote this before you were born?’

Charlie nodded. ‘She even left me these gifts.’ He looked at the objects on the floor; some of them he had never had use for ... until now. *She knew*, he thought. *She knew we’d be searching for the gateway. Maybe that’s what she meant –*

‘She said she had dreams about you.’ Alex took the thought right out of his head. ‘You had a dream about Derkein before you even met him. Maybe whatever happened to your mum is happening to you. It could be genetic. Richmond could be right. Maybe you are psychic.’

‘I knew it,’ Richmond said triumphantly.

Alex read from the letter. “‘Arcadia awaits your return’”. What’s that supposed to mean? You’ve never been to Arcadia. Have you?’

‘Of course not,’ Charlie replied. ‘I never even heard of the place until I had that dream about Derkein.’ He reached into the bag, pulled out the two parchments he had found with the letter, and handed the map to Alex. She and Richmond studied it.

‘Eden,’ Alex whispered. Then she gasped. ‘This is a map of Arcadia!’

‘How’d you get it?’ Richmond asked.

‘It was with the letter,’ Charlie answered. ‘So was this.’ He showed them the logo of the tree growing out of the open book. ‘The map I understand, but this ... I have no clue.’

Richmond took the paper from him and gazed at the logo.

‘Maybe it’s a sign,’ Alex said. ‘Okay, so knowledge is about learning, right? So maybe it has something to do with school.’ She chewed on her bottom lip, a constipated look on her face.

Charlie tried to hold back laughter as he watched her. ‘Don’t hurt yourself.’

Alex gave him a hard look. ‘Okay, genius, you tell us what it means.’

‘Look,’ Charlie said, ‘for all we know it could mean we should climb a tree –’

‘I’ve seen this before,’ Richmond said.

Alex and Charlie exchanged stunned glances.

‘You have?’ Alex asked. ‘Where?’

Richmond paused to think, and then he frowned. ‘I can’t remember.’

‘Rich,’ Alex said in a calm tone, ‘this could be a clue to the gateway.’

‘I’m thinking. I can’t remember where I saw it.’

‘Think harder.’

Charlie knelt down and started packing the contents back inside his bag. ‘We have to go.’

‘Go where?’ Alex asked.

‘We have the compass. We’ll just stick with the plan.’ Alex didn’t look convinced. Glancing up at Richmond, Charlie said, ‘Think faster.’

‘Hey, no one told me I had to remember stuff,’ Richmond complained.

Slipping his arms through the bag straps, Charlie heaved it onto his back and stood up. ‘On three, we kick the door down.’

‘He’s got a gun,’ Alex reminded him. ‘Let’s try not to get ourselves killed –’

A piercing screech, which shook the shed, put an end to their conversation. The trio covered their ears. When the screeching stopped, they looked out the window and could just about make out Derkein standing in the garden by the kitchen window. To get his attention, they started banging on the door.

When Jacob came bursting out of the house, they fell silent.

Jacob, oblivious to Derkein’s presence, rushed over to the shed and peered through the window at them. He yelled something, but they couldn’t hear him through the shed walls and the rain.

The trio’s gazes shifted to Derkein, who had just sneaked into the house.

‘What is he doing?’ Alex asked.

Seconds later, Derkein came back out of the

house. When he approached the shed, they saw that he was holding the shotgun, pointing it at Jacob, who was still shouting at the kids and had no idea what was happening behind him.

Derkein stopped. He must have said something because Jacob's mouth closed, and his eyes widened. For the first time, a spasm of fear flashed across his face. He turned his back to the trio.

Derkein threw something at his feet. Jacob glanced down but didn't move, at which point Derkein pointed the shotgun to the side, positioned downwards, and fired.

The trio jumped.

Jacob bent down, and when he stood up again, he turned back to the shed, his expression mortified as he unlocked the door.

As the trio stepped out of the shed, Richmond sneered at Jacob. 'Not so tough now.'

'What took you so long?' Alex asked Derkein.

'Cut me some slack here,' said Derkein. 'I'm not as fast as I used to be.'

'Who the hell are you?' Jacob asked Derkein.

'If I told you, you wouldn't believe me.' Derkein looked down at the shotgun and then back at Jacob. 'I don't suppose a hot beverage would be on offer before we head off.' Jacob's eyes narrowed. 'Guys, I believe we have overstayed our –' Derkein bent forward, clutching his stomach. The gun lowered, and he sank to his knees, crying out in agony.

Jacob and the trio froze. The latter knew what was happening, but it was the first time they were

witnessing Derkein ageing. It was horrifying. The veins thickened beneath his skin. His hands became noticeably thinner and more wrinkled. His skin bubbled and boiled, his bones becoming more visible, and the last strands of black hair on his head turned grey.

‘Derkein,’ Alex cried. She made a move towards him, but Charlie grabbed her. Derkein’s uncontrollable twitching would surely have harmed her.

At last, the crying stopped. Derkein was lying on his back, his chest rising and falling rapidly as the rain beat against him.

Charlie spotted the shotgun a few feet away from Derkein. He and Jacob locked eyes, and they both made a go for the gun.

Charlie was in the lead, but Jacob grabbed a lock of his hair, pulled him back, and tossed him head first onto the ground. Pushing himself up, Charlie stuck his leg out, tripping Jacob, who went down, landing with a heavy thud as his stomach made contact with the ground. Getting on his hands and knees, Charlie began to crawl towards the gun when he felt a pressure around his ankles. Jacob flipped him onto his back and pounced on top of him, his hands locked around Charlie’s throat.

Charlie tried to push Jacob off him, but the weight of his guardian was too much for him. He couldn’t breathe. He heard muffled screams and felt his consciousness slipping away. Then a sound reached him through the silence: a thunderclap. The pressure loosened around his throat, and the earthy scent of

wet mud rushed into his nostrils and mouth as he gasped for air.

As Charlie's breathing went back to normal, he sat up and saw Alex holding the shotgun, pointing it at Jacob, who had his head clasped in his hands, groaning in pain.

Richmond helped Charlie up.

'We better go before someone comes,' Alex said. She handed Richmond the shotgun, and then she and Charlie helped Derkein to his feet.

The four of them made their way around the side of the house, Richmond in the lead.

When they reached the front of the house, Richmond halted. 'That's it,' he exclaimed. 'It was at the library.' He spun around, the shotgun held loosely in one hand, the barrels pointed at the others.

With caution, Charlie moved towards him and took the shotgun out of his hand.

'I remember where I saw the logo,' Richmond went on. 'It was at the library in Street.'

'Good job, Rich,' Alex said. 'All we have to do now is figure out how to get there. Do buses run this early?'

Glancing over Richmond's shoulder, Charlie's gaze fixed on the Morris Minor, and a thought came to him. He looked up at the two-storey red brick cottage, dual pitch, tiled canopies shading the windows and the front door. His eyes trailed the red rose vines that ran along the front wall. The cottage looked like something out of a fairy tale. Charlie couldn't help but wonder how something so beautiful could house such

evil. His hands throbbed as his grip tightened around the shotgun.

‘Charlie,’ Alex said, reclaiming his attention. ‘What do we do now?’

‘Wait here,’ Charlie said, and he hurried back the way they had come.

‘Where are you going?’ Alex called after him.

‘I’ll be back in a sec,’ he yelled to her before disappearing around the side of the house. When he got to the back garden, he saw Jacob still on the ground, his body hunched over as he cradled his head. Charlie entered the kitchen and headed straight for the hallway. He went over to the coat hook and rested the shotgun beneath it. Rifling through Jacob’s coat, he pulled out a set of keys and then made his way out the front door.

‘Is someone going to clue me in?’ Derkein asked as Charlie approached.

‘We’ll tell you on the way,’ Charlie said. He held the keys up. ‘You’re old enough to drive, right?’

CHAPTER EIGHT



Black Hole

THE MORRIS MINOR SPED through empty streets, Georgian architecture crafted from limestone flashing by. Street was an old market town situated in a valley eleven miles from Capeton, though Derkein made it seem nearer. Charlie had no idea the car could move so fast.

The rain had stopped, but the sky remained shrouded in dark clouds. They had just driven through the main square where the town clock displayed 7:10 a.m. The two times Charlie had visited Street it had been a vibrant place. Now the deserted silence had that eerie feeling, like walking through a graveyard, which brought back memories of the dream he'd had

a few hours ago.

Derkein turned onto Orange Row, a narrow cobbled street behind the square – made for walking, not for driving – lined with shops and medieval-style buildings standing four to five storeys high that overhung the street so much one could barely see the sky.

‘We’re here,’ Richmond announced from the passenger’s seat.

The car tyres squealed against the wet ground as it veered to the right, back onto the high street, and stopped in front of a two-storey brown brick building, asymmetrically designed, topped with a dome adorned with a bronze statue. The library façade had attractive bay windows on the right and a triple-arched entrance on the left.

They exited the car and headed for the entrance.

‘It just *had* to rain today, didn’t it,’ Alex complained through trembling lips. ‘One little cough and I’ll be on house arrest.’

A sharp gust of wind, blowing the smell of wet earth and sea air – a reminder the beach was close by – brushed against Charlie’s skin, and he shivered. He dipped his hand inside his bag and withdrew the compass. The others leaned in for a peek. They saw what they had hoped to see: the compass needle spinning like crazy.

‘How do we get in?’ Alex asked.

They had expected to see the closed sign on the stained glass door panel, and much to Charlie’s dismay, he knew he would have to use the breaking and

entering skills Jacob had taught him. Fortunately, when he proceeded towards the door, he realised he didn't need the assistance of his alter ego, the Artful Dodger, for the door was open.

It was as if someone had been waiting for them. The first thought that came to Charlie's mind was that Candra had opened the door, just as she had led him to the letter. All this time, he'd thought she wanted to harm him when she had in fact been helping him. He just didn't know why. His second thought was that if the gateway did happen to be inside the library, something could have wandered out.

'A letter, a map, an open door,' Derkein mused. 'I feel like I'm playing Cluedo.' He pushed the door wide open.

'Here.' Charlie handed him a headtorch.

Derkein eyed Charlie's bag. 'You don't happen to have an age-reversal potion in there, do you?' he said with a smile. Charlie appreciated that neither Derkein nor the others had treated him any differently since it had come to light that he may *or may not* be psychic. 'Maybe you three should wait in the car.'

Richmond said, 'But I want to see the gateway.'

'Me too,' Charlie and Alex said together.

Derkein glanced back inside the dark building, deliberating. He looked down at the trio, his expression anxious. 'It's probably best if we stick together. Once we're inside, I need you to listen to me, okay. If I tell you to do something, you do it.'

The trio nodded.

Heading to the right of the building, Derkein led

the way past the reception desk and down the central aisle decked with a row of tables and chairs with bookshelves on either side.

It was silent except for the squishing sound of wet shoes. Everyone was quiet and alone in their thoughts. Charlie scanned the side aisles and the upper balcony, his headtorch illuminating anything within a six-metre range. All was clear, but he sensed that his visitor was present, hiding in the shadows, and for the first time, he didn't feel afraid.

They proceeded towards the large ornate double doors ahead, which opened to a sizable computer area at the rear of the building.

'It's down there,' Richmond said, pointing to the left, down a narrow corridor with a staircase leading to the first floor on the left and a reading area bordered by bookshelves on the right.

Derkein drew in a deep breath and took the lead, Alex behind him, followed by Richmond.

Charlie was about to pursue them but paused when he felt a tingling sensation course through his body, sending goose bumps along his arms. 'Whoa!'

The others stopped and turned to him.

'What -?' Derkein began.

The lights above them started blinking.

The gang exchanged nervous glances.

'Someone's here,' Alex murmured, alarmed.

Charlie looked back towards the direction they had come from and saw the main area still shrouded in darkness.

'I thought the library didn't open till nine,' Alex

went on. 'Charlie, what time is it?'

Charlie looked at his watch and frowned. The minute and the hour hands were spinning in opposite directions. He tapped the screen twice and then paused as the realisation sank in. Dipping his hand inside his pocket, he pulled out the compass and opened it. His eyes shifted from the compass to the watch, and his heart skipped a beat.

The lights stopped flickering.

'That was weird,' Alex remarked.

'It's here,' Charlie said under his breath. He looked at the others. 'The gateway is here.' He started down the corridor, moving around Alex and Richmond, and stopped in front of Derkein. Glancing at the door behind the staircase, he caught sight of the logo above it. 'I want to come.'

Derkein sighed. 'We're not having this discussion again.'

'But the letter –'

'I know what the letter said, Charlie,' Derkein interrupted him, 'but we don't know anything about Arcadia. I know you want answers, but this is not the way.'

'But you can't go alone,' Richmond said, appearing beside Charlie.

'This is not a negotiation,' Derkein said, his voice firm.

'But she led me here for a reason,' Charlie interjected.

Derkein paused, a strange expression – half apprehensive, half curious – gracing his features.

‘She?’

Charlie gulped. ‘I meant the, um, the logo.’ He walked around Derkein, clenching his jaw. He could feel their stares boring into the back of his head. It took much willpower for him to turn back to them. ‘Okay, just don’t freak out.’

Derkein lifted his head back. ‘Oh Lord, help us.’ He placed his hands on his head as he regarded Charlie. ‘You had another dream.’ His voice wavered on the edge of panic.

‘No,’ Charlie said.

Derkein lowered his hands, relaxing his shoulders.

Charlie went on, ‘Someone’s following me.’

‘What!’ Alex exclaimed, and then she slapped her hand over her mouth as her voice echoed around them. Lowering her hand, she whispered, ‘Sorry.’

‘Who’s following you?’ Derkein asked Charlie.

‘I don’t know,’ he replied, ‘but she knew who I was.’

Alex rolled her eyes. ‘It’s not Carla, is it?’

‘No. She’s not even human.’

Silence.

For a moment, Derkein, Alex and Richmond seemed frozen.

‘Not that I know for sure,’ Charlie resumed. ‘I’m just guessing since she can control the wind and teleport. You should have seen it. One minute she was there and the next, poof! You see what I’m saying, don’t you?’

They knew exactly what he was saying. Their stunned expressions and silence said it all.

‘Would someone say something?’ said Charlie.

‘This isn’t good,’ Alex said.

‘Would someone else say something?’

‘Thomas said they were evil. They kidnap people ...’ Alex stopped talking, her eyes widening. She glanced around the surroundings, and her voice dropped to a whisper. ‘What if this is a trap? She could have lured us here to kill us.’

‘She’s not evil,’ Charlie said, and then he thought back to the time in the woods, how she had attacked him and knocked him unconscious. He shook his head, as if to shake off the negative thought. ‘If she wanted to kill us she would have done it already.’ He looked at Derkein. ‘Right?’

‘He does have a point,’ Derkein agreed.

‘Then what does she want?’ Alex asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Charlie cried. ‘She said ...’ He paused and looked away, deliberating. He heard footsteps approaching.

‘Go on,’ Derkein said.

Charlie looked up at him. ‘She said she’s known me my whole life, but I swear I’ve never seen her before. She knew about my dream ... and the talisman.’

Alex huffed. ‘See. She wants the talisman.’

‘You don’t know that. Besides, it doesn’t have the black diamond, so it’s probably broken.’

‘What black diamond?’ Derkein asked.

Charlie lowered his head, wishing he had never opened his mouth. ‘I saw it when I touched the talisman.’

‘You liar,’ Alex exclaimed. Charlie looked up as

she advanced on him. 'You said you didn't see anything.' She smacked him across the arm.

'I didn't know how to explain it,' Charlie said. Alex crossed her arms and turned her back to him. He glanced at Derkein, who was staring at him, dumbfounded. 'You think I'm a freak, don't you?'

Derkein and Alex exchanged a long glance, perhaps trying to read each other's minds. Charlie felt a sense of despair expanding inside him as he watched them.

'I think it's awesome,' Richmond interjected. 'I'd love to be psychic. It'd be so cool to read people's minds and see things before it happens.' He gasped with excitement. 'I'd never have to miss another episode of *The Simpsons*.'

The others laughed.

'Not how it works, Rich,' Charlie informed him.

The laughter died down, and Charlie's gaze shifted back to Derkein, who was now staring at him with anxious eyes.

'You're different, I'll give you that,' Derkein said. 'You're not a freak. Something is happening to you, and I think you feel lost and scared, but that's okay. Sometimes, to find our true self, we have to let go of our past. I know that from experience.' He looked towards the door with the logo, and for a moment, it seemed as if his mind was elsewhere, and then he looked back at Charlie. 'Change is sometimes hard to accept, and fighting it only makes it that much harder.' Although Derkein smiled, Charlie thought he looked troubled.

Cold air brushed across Charlie's face, and the tingling sensation hit him again. He shuddered. 'What *is* that?'

'What's what?' Alex asked.

'Can you not feel that?'

'You know what I feel?' Alex said. 'I feel like we're wasting time.' She approached the door. 'Twenty quid says it's open,' she challenged.

Charlie glanced at Derkein, who dipped his hand inside his trouser pocket and pulled out the pocketknife that belonged to his dad. 'Stand back.' The trio stepped aside as he advanced towards the door. He grabbed hold of the doorknob, twisted it, and pushed it open.

He glanced over his shoulder at the trio and then looked back at the dark room and flicked the light switch on.

Glancing over Alex's shoulder, Charlie caught a glimpse of a compact, windowless space containing bookshelves and boxes. He looked down at the compass in his hand, which was still spinning at an accelerating speed –

A loud racket startled him, and he jumped. Taking two steps to the side, he looked past the staircase, down the dark corridor towards the computer area. He felt his pulse quicken.

'What was that?' Alex asked, panicked.

'Get inside,' Derkein demanded. 'Stay here until I get –'

Hearing a gasping sound, Charlie's eye flickered to the room. Derkein and Richmond were nowhere in

sight. He froze, listening to Alex's frantic voice as he stared at the large black hole in the floor on the other side of the door. 'The gateway,' he muttered under his breath.

'Where did they go?' Alex asked.

The realisation of what had just happened hit Charlie like a ton of bricks. 'They're inside!'

'Where?'

With sudden panic, Charlie realised what Alex was about to do, and he lunged after her. 'Alex, no!'

He was too late. She vanished into the black hole.

'Alex,' he yelled, staring down into the hole. He gripped a lock of his hair and stepped back from the door, his heart racing. Glancing down the dark corridor, he said in a low voice, 'Please be there.' Pocketing the compass, he looked back at the storage room and charged ahead, jumping feet first into the black hole.

The journey happened so fast that Charlie only realised it was over when he landed face down in a patch of pebbles. *Ow!*

'Charlie,' Alex's voice said.

Hearing movement around him, Charlie glanced up and saw the others approaching. They helped him to his feet.

The gang gawked in amazement at their surroundings. Apart from the small shaft of light shining through a gap in the concave ceiling made of stone high above them, it was dark. They were standing in a tunnel about twenty feet wide, stretching a long way in both directions. Charlie's nose caught a

whiff of a foul, unpleasant odour with a tinge of burning incense.

A few seconds passed before anyone spoke.

‘Are we in Arcadia?’ Richmond enquired.

‘We must be,’ Derkein replied.

‘But I didn’t see the gateway,’ Alex said.

Derkein said, ‘That makes two of us.’

‘Wait,’ Charlie said. ‘Didn’t you guys see the black hole?’

‘What black hole?’ Alex asked.

‘It was kinda hard to miss.’ Seeing the perplexed look on their faces, Charlie added, ‘There was a huge hole in the floor. You really didn’t see it?’

‘I wonder if it’s a psychic thing,’ Richmond mused.

‘Okay, let’s focus here,’ Derkein said. ‘Regardless of whether we saw it or not, we stepped through the gateway, and now we’re on the other side. That much we’re certain about.’

‘But what is this place?’ Alex asked.

Derkein’s gaze drifted around the surroundings. ‘My guess is we’re inside a cave.’

Charlie and Alex locked eyes. Seeing the anxious look on her face, he took hold of her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

‘According to Thomas,’ Derkein continued, ‘a day in Arcadia is approximately seventeen days on the surface. The gateway closes in one day surface time, which in Arcadia is ...’ He tilted his head as he did the calculations.

‘One and a half hours,’ Charlie chimed in.

Alex regarded him with surprise. 'I thought you hated maths.'

'I do. I didn't say I wasn't good at it.'

'This is really happening,' Derkein muttered to himself. He took a few deep breaths. 'Okay.' He turned to the wall they had just fallen out of, his headtorch running over the lumpy surface. 'Charlie, I need you to locate the gateway. The three of you have to get back before it closes.'

'You want us to go back?' Richmond asked.

'You have to.'

'Oh please,' Richmond pleaded. 'Let us come.'

Derkein turned to him. 'Hey, I want no complaints, okay.' He looked at Charlie, who let go of Alex's hand and walked over to him.

'I can't go back,' Charlie said.

Derkein lowered his head. 'Don't do this to me.' Charlie heard the desperate plea in his voice.

'We're here now,' Alex said, 'so why not just let us come. The gateway opens again in five days.'

'You don't get it.' Derkein's voice sounded strained. 'You're just kids. Five days is three months on the surface. We don't know what's down here. Anything could happen.'

'That's why we should stick together,' Charlie urged.

'You could die. Do you understand that?'

The trio glanced at one another. Charlie could tell from Richmond's and Alex's expressions that Derkein's words had disturbed them.

'Please,' Derkein said.

Charlie glanced back at him and saw the worry on his face. His eyes shifted, and he scanned the wall, using his headtorch as a guide. To his right, about ten feet above the ground, he saw the black hole, the only part of the wall void of lumps. 'It's there,' he said, pointing towards the hole. He crouched down and picked up a pebble. Inching back from the wall, he tossed the pebble at the hole, and it vanished.

'It's a bit high,' Richmond acknowledged.

'It acts like a suction tube,' Charlie explained. 'Once you make contact, it will take you to the other side.' No sooner had the words escaped his mouth than he caught his breath.

'Where did that come from?' Alex asked.

Charlie shrugged. He honestly had no idea. It was as if someone had forced his tongue, for he'd felt as if he'd had no control over the words that had come out

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'Ow.' Charlie winced as something made contact with the side of his head. It bounced away, and he followed its course as it rolled towards the wall. When it came to a stop, he saw a pebble. Rubbing his head, he looked up at the black hole.

'The pebble came back through,' Richmond said.

Charlie lowered his gaze and caught sight of Derkein's expression. The colour had drained from Derkein's face. Charlie knew what he was thinking, because he was thinking the exact same thing. He had known the truth the moment the pebble had hit him.

Derkein's gaze flitted between the three of them. He looked as if he was about to faint.

‘What’s wrong?’ Alex asked, concerned.

‘This is not happening,’ Derkein’s low voice was almost inaudible. He walked around them and stopped, staring towards the black hole, his fingers massaging his temples. ‘This can’t be happening. It wasn’t supposed to be like this.’

‘What’s wrong?’ Alex repeated.

Derkein dropped his hands and turned to them, his expression pained. ‘I’m so sorry.’

‘Sorry for what?’ Richmond asked.

Charlie glanced at Richmond and Alex, the look of utter incomprehension on both their faces. ‘We’re stuck,’ he said.

‘What do you mean we’re stuck?’ Alex asked.

‘We can’t go back,’ Derkein answered.

‘Yes we can. The gateway will suck us back up to the surface.’

‘Yes, but because the gateway opened in the floor, there is no platform to land on, so we’ll come right back down again.’ Derkein glanced down both ends of the dark tunnel. ‘This is not good.’ After a moment, he looked back at the trio. He opened his mouth, as if to say something, when a menacing snarl echoed in the distance.

‘Please tell me that was someone’s stomach,’ Alex whispered.

‘We have to get out of here,’ Derkein said, his voice panicked. ‘Now.’

Charlie shrugged his rucksack off his shoulder and took out two glow sticks, which he handed to Richmond and Alex. With Derkein in the lead, the

four of them took off in the opposite direction of the sound.

The tunnel was a straight course, about fifty feet long from where they had started, and it smelled horrible. Charlie's nose twitched. He had an inkling the faint smell of incense had been to cover up a more sinister scent ... a smell of death, perhaps.

All they could hear apart from their footsteps was the gentle patter of water. When they reached the end of the tunnel, they stepped onto a platform that mounted four feet out of a lake inside a vast chamber with sharp icicle-like stalactites hanging from the roof. On the opposite side of the water, at a far distance beyond a steep, rocky path, they saw a smoky yellow light. They looked at one another with hope-filled eyes.

'Um, just so you know,' Richmond said, 'I can't swim.'

'How deep do you think it is?' Alex asked.

'Let's find out.' Derkein took the glow stick from Alex and dropped it into the water. They followed its course until it stopped what seemed a few feet down.

'That's not bad,' Alex remarked.

'Yes, but that's just this end,' Derkein said.

At that moment, Charlie had an idea. He opened his bag, took out the rope, and tied one end around a boulder. Taking the rope, Derkein descended the platform and entered the water, which came up to his waist. Alex took hold of the rope and joined Derkein, Richmond behind her, and Charlie behind him.

'I can't believe we're actually in Arcadia.' Alex's

voice rose with excitement. 'This will be the greatest discovery since the extinction of dinosaurs.'

'Assuming dinosaurs did exist, that is,' Derkein said.

Alex shook her head. 'Couldn't just let me have this moment, could you?'

They had travelled two-thirds of the way across the lake, a good twenty metres, when a splashing sound reached their ears, and they stopped.

They looked to the right but saw nothing. Another sound reached them from the left, and they shifted their gazes.

'Keep moving,' Derkein instructed.

As soon as they took off, Richmond screamed and jumped back, colliding with Charlie. 'Something touched my leg,' he cried.

'That's not funny,' Alex said in a strained voice.

'I'm not joking,' Richmond said, his expression serious and scared.

A flicker of movement at the edge of Charlie's vision caught his attention, and he looked to his right. He saw the silhouette of a figure rising out of the water. Its top half was huge and hunched over with spikes arched around its head. 'There's something in the water,' he whispered.

'That's what I said,' Richmond muttered.

'No, look.'

From the gasps that followed, Charlie supposed he wasn't the only one who could see the creature.

'I want you to move towards me slowly,' Derkein whispered.

The trio began to move. At that same moment, the creature plunged into the lake, and all they saw were water ripples heading towards them.

‘Run!’ Derkein shouted.

They dropped the rope and made a run for it, Derkein and Charlie both holding on to Richmond. Water splashed everywhere as they powered through it. They were drawing closer to the rocks when another creature, identical to the one they had just seen, sprang out of the water in front of them, and they stopped.

Towering over them, its pupil-less eyes, which glowed with a cold blue light, devoured them. A terrible wail escaped its throat, and it bared pointed fangs with four tentacles dangling from its chin. The creature stood upright like a human and had black leathery skin. Spreading its webbed fingers, it took a swing at them with its long, sharp claws.

‘Get back,’ Derkein yelled, but the first creature sprang out of the water behind them.

The four of them huddled together as the two creatures circled them. Derkein put his hand inside his trouser pocket and withdrew his pocketknife. Pulling out both blades so it resembled a spear, he held the knife out, ready to do some damage with the steel blades.

Charlie looked towards the smoky light far up the rocky path. *So close.* Just when he thought all hope was lost, something unexpected happened. The creatures started snarling at each other, as if arguing over their food.

‘When I say go,’ Derkein whispered to the others, ‘run towards the rocks.’

Like Charlie, he had guessed what was coming. When the creatures went for each other, the gang made a run for it.

Charlie was the first out of the water. He pulled Richmond up onto the rocks and then helped Alex. He looked back towards the water and noticed that the creatures had vanished. His gaze landing on Derkein, who was a few feet away, he extended his hand to him, but then a yelp escaped Derkein’s throat, and he stumbled forward, disappearing beneath the water.

The trio screamed.

Charlie jumped back into the water. ‘Derkein,’ he shouted. A piercing cry reached him, and his body went rigid. Seconds later, about three metres away from him, Derkein resurfaced. Charlie hurried over to him. Derkein was coughing and spluttering but otherwise fine. He had his back to Charlie, holding the knife out in front of him.

Just then, one of the creatures sprang out of the water at them, but it rebounded, its arms flailing everywhere. Charlie spotted the rope fastened around the creature’s neck, and he and Derkein made haste towards the rocks.

As the others helped them out of the water, another tortured cry reached their ears, and they looked back. They saw no sign of either of the creatures. Wasting no time, they headed up the rocky path towards the light.

It took the gang over thirty minutes to make it to

the top of the path. They headed across a stone bridge with a body of water beneath it. Immersed in a bright, warm light that streamed through the arched doorway ahead of them, they emerged out of the cave.

The four of them stared in silent awe at the sight before them. They were standing at the edge of a forest with giant trees surrounding them. Crisp, clean air filled their lungs. Majestic mountains in the far distance glistened like crystals, but even more magnificent was the brilliant sun that hovered high in the sky.

CHAPTER NINE



Land of No Horizon

THREE HOURS HAD PASSED, and the gang had trekked many miles, travelling chiefly through forests. Suspended at the centre, the inner sun was always overhead wherever they went, giving off a softer and gentler light than the sun in the surface world. There appeared to be no horizon in Arcadia. The farther something was, the higher it appeared to be until it vanished into the atmosphere.

As they journeyed through a thick pine forest, using the now normal functioning compass to guide them, Charlie looked behind him and saw Derkein walking with his head down, his shoulders slumped. A mixture of gratification and remorse welled up inside

him, the latter being the result of the former. Had it been Derkein's choice, the trio would not be in Arcadia, but for Charlie, the outcome could not have worked out any better. He had to be here. He had to find the tree that could grant him his deepest wish. Perhaps, he thought, this had been his mother's intention all along: for him to find the Garden of Eden and get the one thing he had wished for on every birthday for the past four years.

Having not eaten in hours and travelling in a place where the temperature was above twenty degrees Celsius, fatigue and hunger was wearing them down. Still, they pressed on, for they had five days – Arcadian time – to get to Eden, find the garden, and get back to the gateway before it closed for another three months.

Having studied the map, they knew Arcadia consisted of five continents: Ardenen, Sedona, Agorah, Ethidor and Koura. They knew Eden was in Koura; they just didn't know how they were going to get there, nor did they know where in Arcadia they were.

'I think we're safe now,' said Richmond. 'Can we stop? We've been walking for ages.'

'We should rest for a bit,' Derkein said.

Richmond plopped himself down on a rock, Alex sitting beside him.

Charlie turned to Derkein and saw him gazing up at the sky. Derkein was the only one without a coat, having left it back at the gateway entrance as a marker. 'You okay?' Charlie asked him.

'I feel' – Derkein paused for a moment – 'young.'

'You are young,' Alex pointed out.

'Yes, but I haven't felt this way in weeks. I almost feel like my old self. We've been walking for miles, and I'm in no pain.' Derkein's gaze drifted around the surroundings. 'I wish I had believed my father when he told me about this place.'

'Remember how we reacted when you first told us?' Alex said. 'Imagine going back and telling people where we've been. No one would believe us. They'd have us locked up.'

'But then we'd be famous,' Richmond said.

Charlie snickered. 'Yeah, we'd be the real-life Looney Tunes.'

The others laughed.

'We have to be careful who we trust,' Derkein said after a pause. 'We don't want something as big as this falling into the wrong hands. Who knows what these Arcadians would do if we tried to expose them.'

'So we say nothing?' Richmond asked. Derkein raised his eyebrows at him. 'Fine, I won't say anything.' He crossed his arms and stuck his bottom lip out.

Charlie took his bag off his shoulder and pulled out the map. 'Okay, so we're definitely, maybe in Ardenen –'

'Or Agorah,' Alex cut in, 'since there are lots of forests there too.'

'Okay, so we're either in the north or west of Arcadia,' Charlie said. 'Do we keep heading south?'

'If we go off course now, we'll only end up confusing ourselves even more,' Derkein responded. He stepped towards Charlie and glanced down at the

map. 'Since it's the most wooded area on the map, let's just assume for a moment that we are in Ardenen. At some point, we're bound to hit one of these cities, which I hope will give us some indication of our whereabouts.'

'What if we don't come across any cities?' Charlie enquired.

'Then we'll have to divide our time. The longest we'll spend on this route is two days, leaving us with three days to get back to the gateway.'

'If we get to the sea within two days,' Alex asked, 'then do we still turn back?'

'It depends,' Derkein replied. 'Eden is in the heart of Koura. That could be another long journey in itself. We'll have to all come to an agreement if we get that far.' He started digging a hole in the ground with the toe of his shoe. 'We need to mark this spot.' His eyes flitted between the three of them. 'Who's going to hand over their coat?'

'Use mine,' Alex offered. She stood up and untied her coat from around her waist, handing it to Derkein.

'I don't want to go back to the cave,' Richmond said. 'Those things could still be there.'

'Let's just worry about one thing at a time,' Derkein suggested as he folded Alex's coat into a ball. Crouching down, he stuffed the coat into the hole, concealing it with dirt, leaving only a small part of the fabric exposed. He stood up and went to sit next to Alex, Charlie joining him.

'I'm starving,' Richmond complained. 'Do you think they have McDonald's here?'

The others burst out in laughter.

Richmond frowned. 'What?'

'I don't think this world is like ours, Rich,' Charlie said.

'That sucks. I'm gonna die of starvation.'

'No one is going to die,' Derkein said. 'We're going to get through this.'

Charlie glanced sideways at him, the doubt evident on Derkein's face. He appeared to be deliberating. As if realising Charlie was watching him, Derkein looked at him, his expression twisting from anxiety to something else.

'You think maybe you can kick-start that intuition of yours and point us in the right direction?' Derkein half smiled, though it was not devoid of worry.

All eyes fixed on Charlie, and at that point, he realised with some chagrin that they were all looking to him for answers he did not have.

Derkein placed an arm around Charlie's shoulder. 'Don't look so worried. I'm only playing. You've been more than helpful.' He glanced away from Charlie and took a deep breath. 'Luck is on our side, I feel.'

Ten minutes later, they took off again.

Charlie and Alex were trailing Richmond and Derkein.

'Sorry about before,' Alex said to Charlie. 'You know, about the whole stalker thing.'

'It's all right,' he said. 'Does this mean you forgive me?'

'I'm still mad at you.'

'Oh, come on.' Charlie nudged her with his elbow.

‘I wanted to tell you, I just ... I didn’t want to scare you.’

Alex rolled her eyes, her cheeks lifting slightly as she tried to hold back a smile. ‘Fine. You’re forgiven.’

Charlie smiled. ‘That was easy. Is it because your mum said I was a keeper?’

Alex’s jaw dropped.

Charlie held his hands up in defence. ‘You already forgave me, remember.’

Alex pushed him aside. ‘I take it back.’

‘You can’t. It’s too late.’

Alex crossed her arms. She lowered her voice when she said, “‘I don’t speak Spanish”, you said.’

‘I don’t.’

Alex narrowed her eyes at Charlie. ‘Whatever. You’re still an idiot.’ Despite her obvious annoyance, he saw her eyes twinkle with amusement.

They walked on in silence. After a minute, Charlie said, ‘Carla Shu?’ He gave Alex a raised eyebrow look. ‘Really?’

‘You know she would. She follows you everywhere. Apparently, she was going to ask you out.’

Charlie looked away. ‘Whatever.’

‘I swear. I overheard Gabrielle and Jessie talking about it in geography.’ After a short pause, Alex asked, ‘So do you like her?’

Charlie glanced sideways at her, trying to read her expression, but it was hard, for she was looking at the ground. They followed a trail up a small peak. ‘What’s not to like? She’s nice.’

Alex looked at him. ‘That’s not what I meant –’

‘Hey, guys,’ Derkein called to them. He and Richmond were standing at the top of the peak. Charlie and Alex made haste towards them. When they reached the top, they saw a gleaming creek below. The four of them hurried down the hill.

Charlie dropped his bag on the bank, and he and the others knelt down, scooping up the water with their hands. The water was clear and refreshing. As Charlie lowered his hands for a refill, he saw the shimmering form of a man with crystal-grey eyes gazing at him and jumped back, landing with a hard thud on the ground.

‘Charlie,’ Alex cried out in panic.

‘There’s someone in the water,’ Charlie said.

The others glanced at the water and then back at Charlie, their expressions uncertain.

‘I’m not imagining it. I saw him ...’ Charlie paused. The man had been wearing a talisman around his neck. He drew in a short breath. ‘It’s the same guy I saw when I touched the talisman.’

‘You mean there’s a dead guy in the water?’ Alex asked, alarmed.

‘No,’ he replied. ‘I think it was just a mirage.’

‘You never mentioned anything about a guy,’ Derkein said. His eyes met Charlie’s. ‘What else did you see?’

Charlie thought he saw a suspicious glare in Derkein’s eyes. ‘Nothing,’ he replied.

‘You think this guy is connected to the talisman.’

Charlie nodded. ‘He was wearing it. I think it belonged to him.’

‘You know, you’re really starting to scare me.’

That makes two of us, Charlie thought.

Derkein was silent for a moment, and then he said, ‘We should get going.’ He helped Charlie up, and it was at that point that Charlie realised something was missing.

‘Where’s my bag?’ he asked. He spun in a circle, his eyes sweeping the forest, but there was no bag in sight.

‘Let’s not panic,’ Derkein said. ‘It has to be here. We’re the only ones ... here.’ He shot a tentative glance around the forest. Looking back at the trio, he placed a finger to his lips and motioned with his head at the nearest tree, which they made their way towards. Derkein lowered his voice. ‘I don’t think we’re alone.’

At the sound of something snapping, they jumped.

Derkein pulled out his pocketknife. The gang watched and waited, but nothing appeared.

‘We need to keep moving,’ Derkein said.

‘But we need the map and the compass,’ said Charlie.

‘We can’t stay here. We’ll be all right as long as we keep moving.’ Derkein gave them an encouraging smile, but Charlie saw the pained look in his eyes. Derkein reminded him then of the terrified young man that had appeared in his dream. He had the face of a man but the heart of a boy.

They walked off in the direction they had been heading before they stopped by the creek. Alex and Richmond were ahead, Charlie and Derkein behind. It

was nearing four in the afternoon, and they had been walking for twenty minutes.

Charlie regarded Derkein, whose expression was distant. He hadn't said a single word since they'd left the creek. 'Are you mad at me?'

Derkein looked at him. 'Why would I be mad at you?'

'I lost the compass.'

'I'm not mad at you, Charlie. You didn't do anything wrong.'

'But we have no idea which direction we're heading in, and now we won't be able to find our way back, which means we're stuck in this place for who knows how long—'

'Hey, hey, calm down.' Derkein rested a hand on Charlie's shoulder. 'You're going to have a nervous breakdown if you keep panicking like this.'

'But I'm just so angry.'

'I know you are.'

'Why aren't you angry?' Charlie asked. 'You might be stuck this way forever, and you don't even seem upset.'

'Trust me, I may appear calm, but I am far from it. I mean, look at me. I look like my grandfather, for crying out loud. Yes, sure, I may never get the chance to change back, but I don't know for certain if that will be the case. I like to think about right now and not what if. Right now, I'm alive. If I spend my time worrying about something I can't foretell, I don't know what I'll do. This isn't just about me. I dragged you three into this mess, so I need to stay focused.'

Hope is all I have. I can't lose the one thing that's giving me the strength to go on. Just have a little faith.' He ruffled Charlie's hair. 'You know, there was something my father used to say to me whenever I was worried. "Just don't".'

Charlie wrinkled his brow.

'I know. It used to drive me crazy.' Derkein's mind seemed to drift, and after a pause, he said, 'You didn't do this to me. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be where I am now. You're the last person I would be angry with.'

They had just caught up with Alex and Richmond when they heard it: the mighty roar of something inhuman that made the hairs on their skin stand erect.

They stopped.

Alex grabbed Charlie's arm. 'What was that?'

'It's probably those things from the cave,' Richmond said.

Charlie's blood ran cold. From the volume of the sound, he could tell that whatever had caused the roar wasn't far behind.

They were about to head off again when they heard a dull thud of footsteps and glanced in its direction. They saw a beautiful reddish-brown stag the size of a grizzly bear charging towards them. It was running so fast it didn't seem as if it had any intention of stopping; but then it staggered and crashed, skidding a few feet away from them.

'Oh no.' Alex made a move towards it, but Derkein stopped her.

The trio watched as he walked over to the stag,

the pocketknife held firmly in his hand. They saw deep wounds beneath the animal's blood-soaked fur, its stomach rising and falling slower and slower as it waited for death. Apart from the odd bird and squirrel, the stag was the largest animal they had seen since their encounter with the cave creatures.

Charlie knew the monstrous sound they had heard moments before had not been the sound of a stag, and he wondered if the others were thinking the same thing.

Derkein turned to them, and a look came into his eyes – so they were all set for what he was prepared to do. 'You go ahead,' he said to them.

Charlie looked at Alex, who had a slight shimmer in her eyes. She looked as though she was about to cry.

The trio turned and walked off.

Charlie glanced around and saw Derkein kneeling beside the stag, stroking its head. He averted his eyes. Even though he knew what was coming, he was still unprepared for the overwhelming feeling of sadness that overcame him when an agonising wail ripped through the air.

Alex stopped but didn't turn around. Richmond touched her arm, and in a reassuring voice, he said, 'It's in heaven now.'

A faint smile creased her lips, and she looked at Charlie. 'I don't like this place.'

'Yeah, it gives me the creeps,' he agreed. He looked back at Derkein, who was making his way towards them.

'You don't think we'll really be stuck here, do

you?’ Alex asked.

Charlie was about to reply when a movement at the corner of his eye caught his attention. He turned his head and was stunned to see a boy, maybe ten, eleven years old, squatting on a tree branch, gazing at them with inquisitive eyes. He had short, spiky red hair, wearing black tattered trousers, a maroon waistcoat and half-finger black gloves. Charlie’s gaze dropped to the object in the boy’s hand.

‘That’s my bag,’ he muttered under his breath. The boy looked directly at him, his expression shocked. If ever there was a reaction Charlie would have expected from an Arcadian, it was not that.

A loud roar, like the one they had heard before, ripped through the silent forest, and Charlie’s gaze shifted from the boy to Derkein, who had stopped about twenty feet away from them, staring to the east with a frightened look on his face.

Derkein turned his head towards the trio and met Charlie’s eyes. ‘*Don’t move,*’ he mouthed. When he looked away, Charlie followed his gaze and was slightly dazed at what he saw.

Between the trees, something was moving towards them. At first, it looked like one of the trees had come to life, for the object had rough brown skin akin to a tree bark, but as it got closer, he saw that it wasn’t covered in bark; it was covered in scales. The two things sticking out of its sides weren’t branches. They were wings.

‘What is that?’ Alex asked. She and Richmond were also staring at the animal, which waddled from

side to side, swerving between the trees, as if intoxicated. Although the creature was a good distance away from the trio, Charlie could still hear the scraping of its wings as they dragged along the ground.

Then the creature's head came into view. First, they saw sharp white fangs, and then huge black eyes fixed on them.

No one moved.

'What do we do?' Richmond whispered, his voice shaky.

Charlie stared at the creature, whose oblong head was swivelling from side to side, as if it was as curious of them as they were of it. 'Maybe if we just stand still –'

The beast let out a loud wail and charged towards them.

'Run,' Derkein shouted.

The trio bolted.

As they sprinted through the forest, Charlie heard Derkein shouting some way behind them, but another noise grabbed his attention: the sound of flapping wings. Glancing around, he saw the beast in the sky, its wings outstretched as it swooped towards them. 'Get down,' he yelled.

Alex was the first to hit the ground, and then Charlie went down. He saw Richmond's legs collapse, but they barely touched the ground when a loud cry erupted from Richmond's throat.

Charlie looked up and saw the beast hovering above Richmond, its clawed feet gripping onto his shoulders. With its arms attached to its wings, it

looked like a cross between a pterodactyl and a dragon.

As the beast flapped its wings and took off with Richmond, who was screaming at the top of his lungs, Charlie pushed himself off the ground and lunged forward, grabbing hold of Richmond's legs in an attempt to wrench him free.

Charlie felt his feet leave the ground, and he tightened his grip on Richmond as the beast took off with them. He heard Derkein and Alex screaming after them.

The beast lurched as it tried to climb higher, but the weight of the boys kept it from soaring off into the sky. The boys screamed as they came within inches of a tree. They must have been about thirty feet above the ground. Charlie clung to Richmond for dear life. He hoped both their weight would tire the beast so it would release Richmond, but it seemed eager to hold on to its prey.

Charlie's arms began to ache, and he felt his grip weakening, but he was determined to hang on.

Suddenly, the beast cried out and plunged towards the earth. It spun and rocked uncontrollably, dropping lower and lower until it crashed into a tree branch, releasing its grip on Richmond.

The boys pitched forward and crashed to the ground.

Charlie lay on his back for a few seconds, staring at the sunlight streaming through the canopy of trees above him. The only sounds he could hear were the wails of a tortured beast, running water, and his

heartbeat. He raised his head and looked at Richmond, who was lying on his stomach. 'You okay?'

Richmond nodded. 'I think so.'

Charlie saw the beast thrashing about on the ground not far from them. The top half of its right wing appeared charred. Charlie got to his feet. He could neither see nor hear Derkein and Alex, and with everything in the forest looking similar, he had no idea which direction they had come from. Hearing Richmond wince, he glanced at him and saw him hobbling on one foot. Charlie went over and supported him.

'Where are we?' Richmond asked, his voice dripping with pain.

'That's what I'd like to know,' Charlie said. He and Richmond took off, hoping they were heading back to where they had left Derkein and Alex.

They walked for ten minutes – the cry of the beast like a mere whisper in the wind – before coming to a stop. The sound of running water appeared to be getting louder the farther they walked.

'This isn't right,' Charlie said. 'I don't remember hearing running water where we were before. We must be going the wrong way.'

'Please tell me we're not going back,' Richmond pleaded.

Charlie didn't get to respond as a familiar noise erupted in the distance. They turned around and saw the beast hurtling towards them at full speed. The boys quickened their pace.

Soon, they came upon a river. They stared down

at the wild rapids that swelled and dipped, exposing and hiding boulders.

Hearing the wail of the beast, they turned around and saw it staggering slightly as it maintained its course behind them. They hurried along the bank.

‘We might have to jump,’ Charlie suggested.

‘No way am I jumping,’ squealed Richmond.

Charlie glanced back at the beast. They were seconds away from becoming dinner. Just then, an idea popped into his head, and he stopped.

‘What are you doing?’ Richmond asked, panicked.

‘You ever played dodge ball?’

Richmond blinked. ‘What?’

‘We can’t outrun it, so we have to dodge it – make it go overboard.’

‘But what if it stops?’

Of course, there was a good chance it would stop, but Charlie couldn’t think about that, what with the beast charging straight at them.

‘You go left, I go right,’ Charlie instructed. ‘Ready?’

‘No,’ Richmond cried.

Just as they were about to dive out of the way, a blaze of fire rose up from behind them. It was in the form of a phoenix, its wings spread wide as it hovered above them.

The phoenix firebird charged at the beast, which roared in pain.

Over the noise, the boys could just about make out Derkein’s and Alex’s voices in the distance. They tried to make a run for it, but the creatures were

tussling everywhere.

Finally, seeing a clear path before them, they made a move.

Almost immediately, they stopped as the beast tumbled before them, its wings fully extended. As it swivelled around, Charlie heard a thump as its left wing struck Richmond. Then he felt a crushing blow to his chest that sent him flying backwards and over the bank.

The cold torrents pinched him all over as the river swallowed him. He kicked his way to the surface, water gushing into his mouth as he fought for air. The river knocked him into a rock, and he caught hold of a branch dangling from the bank. Coughing and spluttering, he caught sight of Richmond drifting towards him. With one arm outstretched, he grabbed hold of Richmond as he swept by.

As Charlie clung to the branch, the water beating hard against him and Richmond, he thought about Derkein. The last thing he wanted was to give him a reason to turn back and head home, but if they survived this, he had no doubt that was what Derkein

—

A loud crack snapped him out of his thoughts, and he looked up. Little by little, the branch started to break.

Charlie's eyes opened wide with fear. Within seconds, the branch snapped, and the river swept them away.

Richmond slipped from his grasp as they drifted downstream. Charlie fought against the flow, trying to

get to him, but the current grabbed him, spun him around, and slammed him into a rock. He let out a cry and gripped his arm.

The current peaked, almost tossing him into the air before his bruised frame rammed into another rock, and he went under.

The river turned him repeatedly, suffocating him as water filled his lungs. The cold waves rendered him stiff, numbing the pain in his body.

He had no strength against the water.

He longed for sleep.

A rainbow of light flashed before him. And then there was no more river ...

CHAPTER TEN



Blast from the Past

A FLASH OF PAIN woke Charlie. He opened his eyes and saw a thick canopy of trees above him. He felt more than one pain: the stabbing pain in his right arm, the throbbing left temporal pain and the pain in his entire body where the cold waves had used him as a hockey puck.

Everything came rushing back: the beast, the phoenix firebird, the river ... *Richmond!*

'He's awake,' he heard Alex say. He watched as she tossed wood into the fire near him. Relief flooded through him when he saw Richmond – wrapped in a blue blanket and eating what looked like black grapes, except they were the size of apples – sitting on a log

beside Derkein on the other side of the fire. Looking up at the tree above him, he saw a pair of jeans and a black t-shirt hanging over the fire on a stick supported by two branches. When he tried to move, which was a mistake as any movement was a fuel for pain, he felt something soft enclosed around him.

‘What am I wrapped in?’ he asked in a husky voice. Moving wasn’t the only thing that caused him pain. Every word he spoke made his eyes sting.

‘It’s a blanket,’ Richmond said. ‘It was lying next to you when we got here.’

Charlie let his gaze drift over the dark forest. The trees looked different, the surroundings denser than he remembered. ‘Where is here?’ he asked.

‘Why don’t you tell us?’ Derkein sounded angry. ‘What were you thinking? Do you have any idea how worried we were?’

‘What are you talking about?’ Charlie tried to move but to no success.

‘I’m talking about you running off. It was by some miracle that we found a log lying across the river. It took us two hours to find you. When I saw you lying there, I thought ...’ Derkein sighed in frustration.

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about.’

‘You ran off and left us.’

Charlie looked at Alex and Richmond, who both nodded in agreement.

‘If it hadn’t been for the tracks you left behind,’ Derkein said, ‘we probably would never have found you.’

‘I swear,’ Charlie began, but he paused, wriggling

like a worm as he tried to sit up. After two failed attempts, Derkein got up and helped him into a sitting position. 'Look, I don't know how I got here. The last thing I remember is falling into the river, and then I woke up.'

'Then how do you explain the fact that we saw you running off?' Derkein asked.

'Yeah, or the footprints that led us to you,' Alex said as she sat on the lower end of the twisted tree stump Charlie was leaning against.

'And the blankets,' Richmond interjected.

'I don't know ...' Charlie paused. One word came to mind. 'Candra,' he breathed.

'Who?' Alex asked.

'My stalker,' he replied. 'She must have brought me here.' He glanced at Derkein and was glad to see his frown had faded. The last thing he wanted was Derkein to start regretting having taken him along. 'I think she saved my life.'

Derkein rested his head in his hands. After a moment, he looked up and, in a calmer voice, said, 'This is just too much. Nothing makes sense.' He started massaging his temples with his fingers. He regarded Charlie with concern. 'How are you feeling?'

'I'm okay,' Charlie lied.

'Charlie —'

'I'll be fine.'

'You almost died because of me.'

'How was it your fault?'

'I brought you to this place.'

'But you didn't attack us,' Richmond said. 'It was

that big ugly thing.’

‘Yeah,’ Charlie agreed. ‘You can’t blame yourself for that. Besides, no one, you know ... At least we’re all alive.’ *Thanks to the phoenix.* He looked up at the line of clothes, and it was then he realised he was naked. ‘Who undressed me?’

Alex looked at him and smiled. ‘I had my eyes closed the whole time.’

Charlie stopped breathing, his eyes wide with panic.

The others laughed.

‘Breathe,’ Alex said. ‘I’m kidding.’

Charlie sighed inwardly. Feeling his body heating up, he averted his gaze from Alex.

‘Guys,’ Derkein said after a short pause, his expression now serious. ‘I’ve been thinking a lot about things. We have no idea how near or far we are from Eden. We don’t even know if we’ll be able to find the trail back to the gateway, which begs the question of whether we should continue our search.’ He took a watch out of his pocket, which Charlie identified as his own. ‘It’s coming up to eight, leaving us with just over four days to get back to the gateway. Let’s be realistic. We have a one in a million chance of finding Eden.’

‘Better than no chance,’ Alex said.

Derkein’s expression was calm but otherwise unreadable. ‘I don’t want you to get your hopes up. It’s going to be hard. It could get more difficult, and you may even get hurt.’ Panic was clear in his voice. His anxious eyes flicked between the three of them,

measuring their expressions. 'If anyone wants to go back, we'll turn around right now. I will not get upset.'

'You can't go back like this,' Charlie argued. 'You age too quickly in our world.'

'I know. That's why I won't be going back.'

Charlie glanced at Alex and Richmond, who both stared at Derkein in shock.

'At least, not just yet,' Derkein added.

'Well, then, neither am I,' Charlie said.

Derkein leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs, his fingers intertwined. 'You've all seen how dangerous this world is. There is no guarantee we'll make it out safely.'

'We might as well just keep going,' Alex said. 'You said yourself that we might not find our way back to the gateway, so why waste all that time. We won't know if we'll find the garden if we don't try.'

'Alex is right,' Richmond agreed. 'Let's just try.'

Derkein sighed and lowered his head in his hands, running his fingers back and forth through his hair. He looked back at the trio and shook his head. 'It's too dangerous. I can't take that chance.'

'If you don't let us come,' Charlie threatened, 'we'll just follow you.' He looked at Richmond and Alex, who both nodded in agreement, and then looked back at Derkein.

'Guys, please,' Derkein pleaded, 'think about this. You have a life, people who care about you –'

'So do you,' Alex interrupted him. 'So what if we're gone a few more days. It will be worth it.'

Derkein stood up and turned his back to them as

he stared up into the dense canopy. 'You have to think about the risks,' he said in a low voice. He turned back around. 'We might not be so lucky next time.'

There was silence as they all thought long and hard about the decision they had to make. They had travelled a long way in only half a day. Sure, when Charlie thought about it, it seemed almost foolish to continue on the journey, not knowing if they were heading in the right direction. Then again, considering he had no recollection of how he ended up so far from the river when he had been unconscious, it made him wonder if perhaps Candra was leading them to their destination. It wasn't hard to believe after all. It seemed as though she had been helping them along the way.

Charlie would like to blame Alex for putting doubts in his head about Candra, but if he was being truthful, he would admit he had questioned Candra's intentions since the moment she entered his life. What did she want from him? Why was she helping him? Why hadn't she shown her face since they'd entered Arcadia? He wanted answers.

'Are you sure this is what you want?' Derkein asked.

The trio looked at one another. Smiles broke out on their faces.

Charlie answered, 'We're sure.'

'All right.' Derkein handed Charlie three grapes before sitting back down on the log.

'These are massive. Where'd you get them?'

'There are grapevines all around us. It's quite a

good spot you chose.’ Charlie scowled at Derkein. ‘I mean your lady friend,’ Derkein corrected himself. ‘It’s too dark to continue, so we’ll camp here for the night.’

Glancing down at Derkein’s feet, Charlie saw three wooden spears sharpened at both ends. ‘What are those?’

Derkein followed his gaze. ‘Weapons. We need to be armed.’

‘I thought it was only copper and steel that could kill them.’

Derkein picked up one of the spears and ran a thumb over the sharp tip. ‘Yes, but I’m sure these can do some damage. I just hope it doesn’t come to that.’

‘Do you think we’ll all get a wish if we find the tree?’ Richmond asked.

‘I don’t see why we shouldn’t,’ Derkein said. ‘The story goes that whoever finds the tree gets their heart’s desire. If twenty people find it, twenty people get lucky, or so I presume.’

Richmond’s eyes lit up. From the concentrated look on his face, Charlie assumed he was going through his wish list.

‘That is, of course, if the story is true,’ Derkein continued.

‘It better be true,’ Alex said. ‘I’m going to need a miracle to convince my parents to let me out of the house again.’

Charlie’s eyes shifted to Derkein, whose expression turned solemn. ‘I can’t begin to imagine what they’re going through,’ Derkein said. ‘What am I going to tell them? How do I explain where their

daughter's been?'

'We could say we were abducted by aliens,' Richmond suggested.

The others looked at him, deliberating.

'That might actually work,' Alex said. 'People talk about alien abductions all the time. We don't even need proof. We can just say we have amnesia.' She glanced at Derkein. 'What do you think?'

'Would your parents buy it?' Derkein asked.

'Yeah. Mum's a big E.T. fan. I'll just tell them I saw a bright light.'

'And little green aliens,' Richmond said. 'There has to be aliens.'

'I'm kinda planning on sticking with the amnesia thing after that,' Alex said. 'I don't want to be in therapy the rest of my life. The alien idea is a little more far-fetched than what I usually come up with, but they tend to believe what I tell them. We have a treaty in our house where we have complete trust in each other.'

'Your parents sound reasonable,' Derkein commented. 'I would have given anything for my father to have had that much faith in me. Then again, I didn't always give him reasons to, so can't say I blame him.'

'Why aren't you and your dad close?' Charlie asked.

Derkein drew in a deep breath. 'Let's just say my father is a man who sticks to things, and I'm, well, the opposite. I wasn't enthusiastic when it came to my career. I lost many jobs, which he didn't take too well.'

He was always reminding me how lucky I was to be born into wealth when he had to sweat to get where he is. He wanted me to be some big shot lawyer. I wanted to have fun, and he couldn't ... He wouldn't accept that. He thought I was wasting my years.'

'What about your mum? What did she think?' Alex asked. For a moment, there was silence. 'Sorry. If you don't want to talk about her –'

'It's not that. It's ... It's been a long time since someone asked me about her. My mother was a painter who believed in free will. She always told me that I shouldn't do something just because I could, but that I should do it because I wanted to. She said that a person should make their own tracks instead of following someone else's.'

'What did you want to do?' Charlie asked.

'I wanted to do many things, but that wasn't even the problem. What made my father disappointed was that I never stuck to anything. It wasn't until my mother died that I realised there was something I was always passionate about ... Photography.'

'My dad's a photographer,' Alex interjected.

'A common interest,' Derkein said. 'Perhaps that will break the ice when I tell your parents about our abduction theory.' Derkein smiled to himself, and his mind seemed to wander. 'Mum loved to take pictures – said they gave her inspiration. She gave me my first camera when I was five.' He snorted. 'I remember the day I told my father I wanted to be a photographer. I'll never forget the look he gave me. I was twenty-two and a Harvard Law School dropout ...' Derkein paused

and looked away, as if thinking about something.

‘What did he say?’ Charlie asked.

Derkein looked at Charlie, and even though his expression was unreadable, there was a touch of resentment in his voice when he spoke. ‘I wouldn’t say he shared the same enthusiasm about it as he did about law. He thought I had no ambition. He was a determined man, and I suppose he wanted me to be the same. Problem is we were too different, always have been.’

Derkein was silent for a moment. Then, flashing them a smile, he said, ‘But if there was ever anything he taught me, it was that everything happened for a reason. However terrible things may seem, I know that if this hadn’t happened to me, I would never have met you guys.’

The trio smiled.

Despite the pain leaving Charlie, the numbness in his body was a constant distress as he tried to get dressed. He leaned against the tree stump, his sharp eyes scanning the forest. ‘Where’s my coat?’

‘You must have lost it in the river,’ he heard Derkein say from the other side of the tree.

‘Lost mine too,’ Richmond said.

‘What are we going to use for markers?’ Charlie asked.

‘With the weather being so perfect,’ Derkein said, ‘I doubt you’ll need the blankets, so we can use those.’

Charlie finished dressing and grabbed the blanket and wooden spear that was propped against the tree stump.

‘Charlie!’ Alex exclaimed. ‘Almost didn’t recognise you with your clothes on.’

Derkein and Richmond snickered.

Charlie chuckled. ‘You should be a comedian – oh wait, you’d have to be funny.’

Richmond pointed at Alex. ‘He got you,’ he teased. Alex tossed a grape at him, which hit him on the back when he tried to dodge it. ‘That hurt!’

As Derkein tried to settle the dispute between them, Charlie heard a sound that made him look ahead. He shrieked when he saw a figure in the distance. *Candra?* The figure walked off in the opposite direction. He started to go after her but Derkein stopped him.

‘What are you doing?’ Derkein asked.

‘It’s Candra.’

‘Where?’

Charlie pointed, but the figure had vanished. ‘She was right there.’ *Why does she keep doing that?* He looked back at the others. Even though it was eight thirty in the evening, it was still light enough to make out their facial expressions. *Oh great, they’re giving me that look again. Thanks a lot, Candra.* ‘I think she wants us to follow her.’

‘No, that’s not a good idea,’ Derkein said. ‘It will soon be too dark for us to see anything. This is not the time to go wandering the woods.’

Charlie looked down at the fire, and a thought

came to him.

‘Why do I feel as though we’re chasing a ghost?’ said Derkein, who was carrying Richmond on his back. ‘Are you certain we’re going the right way?’

Charlie, who was holding a wooden stick torch, glanced at him. ‘I’m sure,’ he replied. *I think.*

‘You know, if she really wants to help,’ said Alex, who was also holding a burning torch, ‘she could sort us out with a pizza or something.’ The others regarded her. ‘I’m just saying.’

The gang had been walking for ten minutes, and Charlie still saw no sign of Candra. He was starting to wonder if it had been a mistake going after her – if it had been her – when they came to a slope and spotted a shallow stream below.

A profound sense of *déjà vu* stirred inside Charlie, and an image of a high stone wall flashed across his mind, lasting only seconds.

Charlie blinked hard. ‘There’s a wall,’ he muttered under his breath. He glanced around him, but all he saw were trees and moss-covered boulders. He took off down the slope.

‘Charlie, wait,’ Derkein called after him.

‘There’s a wall around here,’ Charlie said.

‘How would you know that?’

‘I just saw it –’ Another image flashed across Charlie’s mind, and he stopped. It was the same stone wall with a twin-arched doorway, three steps leading

up to it. The image vanished, and his head swivelled to the left, as if someone had called him. 'I saw a doorway ...' He took off, and the others pursued him.

A few short steps later, they came across the doorway – or rather the ruins and the only part of the wall still standing, just about. What was once a twin-arched doorway was now a single arch, enclosed by shrubs, vines and trees.

'You just saw this in your head?' Derkein asked.

Charlie nodded.

Derkein's face displayed a mixture of shock, disbelief and confusion. 'Just now? Since we started walking?'

Charlie nodded again. He couldn't tell whether or not Derkein believed him, but he was starting to feel as though he had no control over his own mind.

'It could just be me,' Alex said, 'but you seem to have gone up on the weird scale since we entered Arcadia.'

'Look, maybe we should go back to the campsite,' Derkein suggested.

Charlie wasn't paying attention to the others. As he stared at the remnants of the past, the strangest thing started to happen: the world came alive.

The twin-arched doorway materialised before him, the stone wall on either side. Charlie's jaw dropped. Climbing the steps, he walked through the doorway, the view expanding before him, and his heart fluttered.

The rich floral smell was more than welcoming; it was mouth-watering. He saw flowers, large

mushrooms, trees, peacocks, tigers, buildings ... people. Everywhere he looked, he saw merry folks dressed in elegant gowns and robes.

He knew right away that the people weren't human, but it still surprised him when he saw a young boy sprinting so fast he couldn't keep his eyes on him, a girl travelling thirty feet in one leap and an eagle transforming into a man.

He had no idea what paradise looked like, but he was willing to bet every penny he had that this was it.

Heading up a set of stone steps, he came to a raised circular pavilion bordered by vine-covered pillars with a fountain in the centre. Beyond the fountain were more steps, which led to ancient Greek architecture surrounded by columns that supported pyramid roofs. Charlie turned around to admire the view below.

A voice behind him said, 'Your Majesty.' It was a woman's voice, soft and familiar. Whirling around, he saw a woman in a long russet gown, her auburn hair tied back, descending the steps.

Your Majesty? Charlie pondered. The woman smiled at him and bowed. All it took was one look at her alluring green eyes for him to realise it was Candra. His breath caught in his throat as he gazed at her scarless face. She looked so different, so happy. He returned the smile without realising what he was doing. His eyes followed her as she continued down to the garden. He was about to go after her when a splashing noise behind him made him stop and turn around.

The water from the fountain swirled upwards like a whirlpool and transformed into a woman. Charlie stared in awe at the woman who had just climbed out of the fountain, her gown dry. She bowed to him.

There was a note of frustration in his voice when he asked, ‘What’s with the bowing?’ The woman just smiled and walked away. He turned back to the fountain and walked over to it.

When he looked in the water, he saw the white-haired man he had seen in the creek.

‘What do you want from me?’ Charlie asked. He paused when he noticed the man mimicking him. He found it even stranger when the man wrinkled his brow, for he felt as confused as the man looked. It was then, as he stared into the man’s grey eyes, that he realised something. At the same time, the wrinkles on the man’s forehead vanished, and he looked shocked –

The image vanished, and Charlie found himself staring at Derkein, who was standing in front of him, gripping his shoulders. ‘Charlie, can you hear me?’ Derkein asked.

Charlie blinked hard. He looked through the single-arched doorway behind Derkein, but all he saw was the forest.

‘Hey,’ Derkein said, ‘talk to me.’

‘There used to be a palace here,’ Charlie said.

‘Doesn’t look like a palace now,’ Richmond observed.

Derkein let go of Charlie, his expression anxious. ‘All right, I think it’s time we head back to the campsite.’

They started to head off when Charlie suddenly stopped.

‘What is it?’ Alex asked.

Charlie’s eyes swept the forest. ‘I heard something.’ He expected Candra to pop out of her hiding place. Instead, he saw the red-haired boy he had seen earlier that day, watching him from behind a tree. ‘Hey. Where’s my bag?’

The boy’s eyes widened in shock, and he took off.

‘Hey.’ Charlie chased after him.

‘Charlie,’ Derkein called. ‘Charlie, get back here.’

Charlie didn’t stop. With the burning torch still in his hand, he raced through the forest after the boy. ‘Stop!’ he yelled. ‘I just want my bag.’ The boy was a good thirty feet ahead of him. *What do they feed this kid?*

‘Charlie,’ he heard Derkein call. It wasn’t until a loud cry reached him that he stopped.

It was Alex.

He turned around but saw no sign of the others. Panicked, he looked back at the boy, who had also stopped, and then he turned and ran back the way he had come.

It didn’t take him long to spot Derkein. When he got closer, he saw Richmond, who was now on his feet, Alex’s burning torch slowly fading on the ground beside him. But where was Alex?

Seeing Derkein and Richmond glancing up into a tree, he followed their gazes and spotted Alex trapped in a rope net.

‘It could be worse,’ Richmond said. Charlie and

Derkein glanced at him. 'What? It could be.'

Derkein's gaze shifted to Charlie, and the lines on his forehead smoothed out, his expression stern. 'Didn't we just have a conversation about you running off?'

'I know,' Charlie said, 'but I was trying to get my bag back.'

Derkein looked confused. 'It's not just going to fall out of the sky.'

'What? No, that kid –'

'Ah, hello,' Alex said hotly. 'Girl in a rope here. I don't know about you guys but I'm thinking whoever set this trap might come back.'

Charlie looked up at her, her body bent in an awkward position with her legs reaching high above her head, and a faint smile crept onto his face. 'Hang in there, Alex,' he called up to her.

'You just wait till I get down, Charlie Theodore Blake,' she threatened.

Richmond snickered. 'Your middle name's Theodore?'

Charlie looked at him, his smile fading. 'Shut up.'

Derkein cleared his throat to refocus their attention. 'How are we going to get her down, boys?' he asked.

Charlie glanced back up at the tree. The distance between Alex and the ground was at least twelve feet, twice Derkein's height. To get her down, Derkein would have to hoist Charlie onto his shoulders and then some.

As Derkein pondered a strategy, Charlie's focus

shifted to the thudding sound he heard coming towards them. Before he even had time to panic, the sound died almost as soon as it had begun.

He turned around and froze, the sound of his heartbeat in his ears as he stared at the line of people armed with shiny blades and arrows pointed at his head.

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