

BOOK ONE
TALISMAN OF EL TRILOGY

TALISMAN
OF
EL

AL STONE



CENTRINIAN

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*For my mother, Pauline, the first to hear the story.
Thanks 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 surface with a collection of daggers and guns. 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 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 looked out over the back garden and the 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 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 watched 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 boy. '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, 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 in his head.

'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 glared at the girl, his jaw tightened. '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.’

He 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 back, 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. Carla he didn’t mind, 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 glittered 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

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