



CHAPTER TWO

Trina dropped no plates that night, and while she did pretty much the same as she always did, she was tipped heavily. She had more confidence, more presence, she thought, and her customers liked her all the better for it, smiling and joking, their eyes drawn to her. Even Jimmy complimented her grudgingly and with a watchfulness that was wary, almost fearful. She ended her shift jubilant, snatching off the apron and whipping it precisely onto its hook before stalking out as if she owned the place.

There was only one thing that gave her pause. As she had cleared each meal, she had found herself lingering over the trays of flatware, drawn to them, the knives in particular. She reached in and cautiously drew out a steak knife, feeling the shape of the handle in her palm, the way the fine cutting edge seemed to slice through the very molecules of the air. She could almost taste the tang of its metal in her mouth, knew exactly where the blade was keen and where it had dulled with use and rough handling. It was an odd sensation but was also strangely comfortable. More than that, it felt natural, as if the blade had become an extension of her

arm, something that was bound to her on some impossible organic level. She held it out before her, and it was as if she had evolved or, stranger still, had grown into what she was meant to be, muscle, bone, and sinew indiscernibly becoming steel somewhere below the skin. She swept her hand back and forth, cutting the air, until she felt Jimmy watching her, and forced herself – with difficulty – to put the knife down.

At home she felt it again, the cutlery in the kitchen drawers and the knife block on the counter sang to her, begging her to hold them, to wield them. She barely heard her father's idle, end of day chat and excused herself from dinner early, so she could leave the knives alone, uneasy about how badly she wanted to hold them, to test their weight, their balance . . .

She almost ran upstairs, relieved to separate herself from all that steel, and closed the bedroom door behind her so roughly that the vibration shook a crystal bud vase from a shelf by her bed. She crossed the room in a single bound and leapt, adjusting precisely in midair, then absorbing the shock of her fall with one hand. With the other, she caught the vase an inch above the hardwood floor.

“Everything OK?” called her father from below.

“Yes,” she replied, adding mostly to herself, “I think so.”



She dreamt of a bird-headed monster, a terrible, reptilian thing with hard eyes and a long, sharp beak. It had monstrous, clawed hands and wielded a staff of power from which it shot lightning. It was coming for her, stalking her, blasting apart every obstacle behind which she tried to hide. She ran, blundering and falling,

her old, clumsy self, while bells rang and her phone buzzed and the chrome chair she had unsettled spun on its axis as it fell.



Trina woke disoriented and exhausted, as if she had barely slept at all.

“You OK?” her father asked, over bagels and garden veggie cream cheese. “Maybe you should take the day off school.”

“Nope,” she said, needing to douse his concern as quickly as possible. “I’m fine. And I’ve got a test in bio.”

“Shot of coffee? Wake you up a bit?”

Trina made a face. She hated coffee, as he well knew.

“I’ll get a Coke or something at school,” she said. “Just need something to help me focus.”

She avoided looking at the kitchen drawer where the knives were calling to her.



Jasmine spotted her outside the bathrooms by Reception.

“So,” she said, “Marvel movie marathon tonight, or *Buffy* season five?”

“I don’t know,” said Trina. “I’m pretty beat. Let’s see how I am doing by the end of the day. If I’m awake enough to get my homework done early . . . What?”

“You look . . . I don’t know. Different?”

“Like I said, lousy night’s sleep,” said Trina, grinning. “But thanks for drawing attention to my state of near-death. I’d

appreciate it if you could go a little easy on the astonishment that I'm walking around."

"No!" said Jasmine. "I didn't mean different, *bad*. It's a good different. You seem, I don't know, taller, more assured."

"Pretty sure I didn't grow overnight," said Trina, though she looked away as she spoke. She was wearing the sword necklace under her shirt.

"So, what gives?"

"Well, I have a secret admirer, or so my dad thinks, and I didn't smash anything at Jimmy-Jack's last night, so maybe I'm just feeling more competent than usual."

"Secret admirer?" Jasmine exclaimed. "Spill!"

Trina hesitated, but her friend's open, beaming face was impossible to deny. She wondered if she would be as generous, as utterly lacking in envy if their positions were reversed. She fished inside her shirt and plucked the necklace out, explaining about the anonymous box and its cryptic note. Jasmine leant in to study the necklace, eyes tight, mouth opened in a caricature of curiosity. She smelt of soap, and her shampoo had a whiff of strawberry to it.

"Woah," she said. "Who do you think it's from?"

"Got me," said Trina, shrugging and leading the way down the bustling corridor to their first class. They had been careful to pick the same classes this semester after barely seeing each other the previous year. "Weird, huh? I mean, I really have absolutely no idea. I kinda thought that when you got a gift from a secret admirer, you usually had a pretty good idea who sent it."

"I have no experience in these matters," said Jasmine with mock seriousness. "I will now speculate wildly."

"Please don't."

“Could be Tyler Mack who sits behind us in bio. He’s totally into you.”

“He’s totally not, and I don’t have him down as a *Phantasm Three* player or, for that matter, a cryptic note writer. If it was from him, he’d have announced it in eight-foot neon letters carried by a marching band.”

“Who then?”

“See above, re: me not having a clue.”

Jasmine pouted but found a silver lining, as she tended to.

“I’m going to scrutinise every guy who looks at you today,” she said. “You just go about your business being all ho-hum normal, and I will be your James Bond eyes, only without the cocktails and tux.”

“What makes you think it’s a guy?” said Trina archly.

“Good point!” said Jasmine. “A mystery girl. Interesting.”

“You are enjoying this way too much,” said Trina, though she smiled as she said it, because Jasmine’s response made the whole thing feel fun and playful and not weird and life altering.

The hallways were busier than usual, and the sheer volume of people made Trina gasp. It wasn’t that there were more people around today, she just felt more aware of them than usual, the sounds of their feet and voices, the smells of their bodies, deodorants and perfumes. They crowded her like pressure waves.

“You doing all right?” said Jasmine. “You look a bit . . .”

“Yeah, just . . . need a minute.”

Trina frowned, eyes closing, finger and thumb pressed to the bridge of her nose as if forcing something into her forehead. When she felt more composed, more focused, she opened her eyes again and found Jasmine watching, her face a mask of concern.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Just tired,” Trina said. “I should pop a couple of Advil.”

She was about to start walking again when she spotted someone who seemed to consider her as he passed: the boy in the gold-rimmed glasses she had bickered with the day before. He stared at her unsmiling as he passed.

“Who is that?” she asked, turning to watch him go.

“Don’t know his name,” said Jasmine. “He’s new. Transferred from Charlotte.”

“Moved here from Charlotte?” Trina said, aghast.

“I know, right? No wonder he’s so miserable.”

But he hadn’t looked miserable exactly, Trina thought. Yesterday he had looked sour and condescending and hostile. Today he merely looked . . . empty. His skin was waxy, and his eyes were dead. Like there was no one inside. As they made their way to class, Trina told herself she was imagining things, but her mind kept coming back to the strange boy’s blank, appraising stare, and though the room was warm, she shuddered as if caught in a chilly draught.

She felt again that unreasonable sense of wrongness, of guilt. She scowled, annoyed with herself but determined not to say anything to Jasmine because her friend would say what she always said, that Trina worried too much about what people thought of her, that she was too bent on avoiding conflict. It was all true. Her spat with the boy yesterday had been one of those rare moments where she had argued mostly out of surprise that someone could be so unpleasant with so little cause. She’d called him an asshole spontaneously, because he had shocked it out of her. If she had had time to think, she would have said nothing, and on most days would have had to repress the urge to go after him and apologise.

Not today though. She felt different today, more settled in herself. The momentary sense of guilt was, she decided, nonsense, a stupid remnant of her former self. She pushed it away.

It turned out that the boy with the dead eyes wasn't the only new kid at East Trey High. Trina met the other in the library after lunch while she was working on her English assignment; she hadn't given up on the *Marvel/Buffy* marathon at Jasmine's house.

"Miles to go before I sleep," she muttered as she found her page.

She didn't know he was there at first. Her face was thrust into a book so deeply that it took a while to notice that the shadow that had slid onto the page was not moving. She looked up to find the new boy looming over her. The structure of his face was so sharp that the afternoon light cast deep, hollowing shadows around his eyes and jaw. It made him look striking in a broody sort of way, but also almost sickly. His hair was black and shaggy, while his eyes were large and a green so dark they almost matched his hair. He was leaning silently on the other side of the desk, his eyes fixed on her.

Trina's senses screamed, a cacophony of confused impulses, but the one that cried out loudest was alarm. She pursed her lips and forced herself to hold his gaze.

"Can I help you?" she said.

"I think it's rather the other way around," said the boy. His voice was odd. Not local. Possibly not even American.

Trina snorted. "That may be the worst pick up line I have ever heard," she said, genuinely amused in spite of the chaos of feelings.

"It's not a line," he said.

"Sure sounded like one."

The boy took his eyes off her at last, flashed them around the library, and sighed. "Can we start again?" he said.

"Start what?" said Trina, not giving an inch.

The boy stepped back, hands half raised in surrender. "Fine," he said. "But tell me one thing."

"What's that?" said Trina, her face like slate.

"Are you wearing it?"

Her confusion lasted less than a second, then her hand went instinctively to her throat.

"Don't take it off!" said the boy, suddenly urgent.

"If you think I'm wearing it for you, you've got another thing coming," she said, reaching round to unclasp it. "I don't even know you."

"I said don't take it off," he whispered, leaning forwards and actually seizing her hand.

Trina shook him off and got to her feet. "Who do you think you are?" she demanded. "You don't know me. I sure as hell don't know you."

"That's true," he said, calmer now.

The response took the edge off her fury.

"Well then," she said.

"We don't know each other," he repeated.

"But you sent me . . .?" She snatched her hand from the chain, suddenly unwilling even to show it to him.

"Yes," he said. "It belongs to you."

The words from the note stopped her, but she rediscovered her outrage.

"It doesn't," she said, and now she did take it off and thrust it towards him. "I've never seen it before."

“I know,” he said, keeping his hands away from hers. “But it is yours nonetheless.”

“You’re talking nonsense,” said Trina.

“Yeah?” said the boy, leaning in close again. “Have you ever worn anything that fit you more perfectly?”

“What?” she gasped. “It’s a necklace. Pretty much one size fits all, I’d say.”

“You know what I mean.”

And the truth was, she did. Taking it off had been a wild gesture, but it had pained her all the same, as if she had torn away a strip of skin. Worse, whatever metaphorical wound had been opened when she took the chain from round her neck, the aftermath was worse. Somehow, inexplicably, the world had dulled a little. Its colours had paled, its scents had evaporated, her hearing had numbed like she was on a plane or battling flu. She felt muffled and, what was worse, she immediately knew that this was how she had always felt.

Until she had started wearing the necklace.

This was normal. This was ordinary. The necklace made her . . . special. She had known it before but had ignored it because the truth of the thing made no sense and her brain wouldn’t let it in.

“Put it back on,” said the boy. “It’s important.”

She stared at him, wanting to do what he said but refusing to give in.

“It won’t hurt you,” he said, gentle now. “Quite the contrary. And you may as well, no one else can wear it.”

She considered that doubtfully, then, on impulse, laced it around her neck once more. Immediately the heightened world returned, so that she gasped with the surge of sensation as the library came into sharper focus again.

“Who are you?” she said.

“I’m Percy,” he said, extending his hand.

“Like Hotspur,” Trina replied, not thinking.

“What?”

“Character in a play we’re reading in English,” said Trina, waving the remark away and wishing she hadn’t made it. “I’m Trina.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said.

“Right.”

“I’m new.”

“No kidding,” she replied, considering his hand for a long moment before taking it and giving it a peremptory shake. “Did you transfer from Charlotte too? You must really hate your parents . . .”

But he was shaking his head and smiling wide enough to show even white teeth.

“No,” he said. “Transferred from Raleigh. Deliberately. I came to see you.”

Trina blinked and leant back a little.

“OK,” she said, frowning. “Again with the lines . . .”

“No,” he said again. “I mean it. I came to see you and give you that.” He nodded at the necklace. “But I also have to explain how to use it, and we don’t have a lot of time.”

His earnestness unnerved her and she pulled away, actually leaning back, those few extra inches as good as a wall.

“Yeah, I don’t know what you want,” she said, “and I’m grateful for the necklace, which is real pretty, but I don’t owe you anything for it. If you think I do, you can take it back. Maybe I’ll see you around.”

And she turned away.

“I’ve seen your dreams,” he said, his voice a notch harder, shriller.

She stopped, mostly from anger at his effrontery, his presumption, but she revolved to face him all the same.

“Like I said,” she said, her voice low and dangerous, “you don’t know me. You sure as hell don’t know what goes on in my head when I’m asleep.”

“I know about the beaked monster,” he replied coolly. “I know about the staff of power he wields. I know that they are real, and they are coming.”

Trina opened her mouth but words failed her.

“You want to know how I know?” said the boy. He yanked his t-shirt up as high as his chest. The flesh below it was seared and blistered from his belt buckle to his sternum, the skin blackened and flaking on the outside, red and raw in the centre. At the heart of what looked horribly like a massive burn was a terrible hole, several inches across, dark, poisonous and glistening inside.

Trina stared in horror, realising that she had been able to smell the rawness of the injury before. No wonder he looked unwell.

“Oh my God,” she gasped. “You need to be in a hospital.”

“They can’t do anything about it,” he said, dropping the hem of his shirt again to hide the horror beneath.

“Of course they can!” Trina retorted. “We should go. I’ll call an ambulance . . .”

“No!” he said again, and though he reached for her with one strong hand, it was his eyes that stopped her, for they were full of pain and a deep, potent conviction. “This is a wound made by the staff of power. It is a magical injury, and no human hospital can fix it.”

Trina stared at him.

“You’re insane,” she said, though her voice lacked all conviction. She said it because it had to be said, because the reality she had known all her life demanded it, but she knew, as soon as the words were out, that she was wrong. The rules of the reality she had known no longer applied.

It was as if he had read her thoughts, because Percy, if that was indeed his name, did not bother to contradict her. He stared long and hard at her, and then he sank into the chair again as if exhausted beyond measure.

“I cannot fight the thing that is coming,” he said. “You may be able to. I do not know if you can defeat it, but I will help where I can.”

“Wait. What? I’m not fighting anything! I’m going to take my bio test and do my paper on *Henry the Fourth*, and I’m going to prepare my college applications and maybe, *maybe*, if I’m really lucky, I might get into Chapel Hill and then . . .”

But Percy was shaking his head.

“First, you fight,” he said. “If you survive . . .”

“If I *survive*?”

“Yes, if you survive, then you can deal with the other stuff.”

“This is crazy. You’ve got the wrong person. I’m not fighting for anything.”

“You must.”

“Oh yeah? And why’s that?”

He smiled then, a sad, distant smile that sucked all the air out of the room.

“Because if you don’t,” he said, “then everybody dies.”