



CHAPTER TWO



DANGER ON THE ROAD TO GRIMMHART

Tig was squished in the back of the car with the bags. The sun was starting to set, its orange descent hidden behind high-rise tower blocks and motorway bridges. The silver wolf charm was hidden in the bottom of his rucksack. It had felt somehow disrespectful to leave it behind now that Doctor Killian was gone.

Dad wasn't speaking much and that made Tig worried. Their dad was a man of lists and timetables, not spontaneous trips. Signs for THE SOUTH whipped past. Dad hadn't told them how long the journey to Grimmhart Forest would take. He wasn't even using the satnav. Tig always felt anxious about visiting new places and the thought of a mysterious unknown forest was spine-shivering.

He must have fallen asleep because when Tig next opened his eyes, everything was much darker. He could hear a low hiss and shush – they must be near

to the sea. The wheels grated over pebbled shingle until the car stopped. The headlamps shot out across grey-black water and Tig saw that they had come to the very edge of the shore. A perfume of salt and seaweed filled the car.

'Dad? Where are we?' whispered Elsa.

'Should be here soon,' muttered Dad, and Tig saw his father's silhouette craning to look up at the moon. 'Not long now.'

They waited, Tig growing more and more nervous. Then a sound shook the empty night. It was a bell, echoing eerily across the waves.

'There's something coming!' cried Elsa.

From the darkness of the ocean emerged a small rusty boat. There was a rumble of chains, and the front of the boat was lowered to make a gangway. Dad drove on board and once the gangway was raised back, the craft began to drift out to sea.

Tig stared at the hanging ropes and clinking hooks, a chill icing his blood. Then a figure appeared at the car window and Tig gasped. Two green eyes burst from a face almost entirely covered in tangled black hair; the eyebrows and beard met like two entwined creepers. The man rapped on the window with dirty knuckles.

'Name?'

'Dourwell,' said Dad clearly.

The man gave an approving grunt and then stomped into the cabin. The boat picked up speed and the car jostled with the rhythm of the waves.

'Is he a pirate?' gulped Tig.

'Don't be ridiculous,' muttered Dad. 'He's not a pirate; he's a smuggler.'

Time did funny things on that crossing, with the black sea sloshing around them. Tig was sure they'd been going for hours and hours but when he checked his watch only five minutes had passed. He fell asleep again and was thrust awake as the car bumped down the gangway. He rubbed the window and peered out. It was still dark. The only hint of dawn was a thin grey line on the horizon. Tig twisted in his seat to catch a final look at the boat and its strange captain, before the darkness enveloped them like fog.

The car grumbled over a sandy beach then zoomed onwards again. After an hour, the sun began to rise, trailing their route with cold yellow fingertips. At six in the morning, Dad stopped the car. They had been driving along a stretch of flat road with marshlands on either side. A haze of rain blurred the bleak landscape, and the roads were empty. They were at a crossroads, facing

a signpost pointing right. The signpost was so old and weather-beaten that the words had entirely faded away. Dad opened his car door and stepped out into the rain.

Dad walked up to the signpost. He appeared to be speaking but Tig couldn't make out the words, then Dad gave the sign a hefty push. It started spinning like an arrow on a board game and it finally stopped, pointing back the way they had come.

'Elsa! Wake up!' Tig shook her.

'Wha . . . ?' grumbled his sister.

Dad jumped back into the driving seat and the car shot off back the way they had just come.

'Um, Dad? We've just been this way,' Tig pointed out.

But then he noticed the trees. The marshland was gone and instead they were surrounded by tall spiky pine trees. Their dad spun the wheel and they swerved off the road into the forest. The morning light was abruptly cut off as a green gloom engulfed them. Tig thought he felt the air shudder, but it must have been the car bouncing on the track. The deeper they went, the thicker the forest became as branches overlapped and the gaps between the trunks started to narrow. Tig weirdly felt like the trees were shuffling closer. The track was getting bumpier and narrower. Pine needles scratched the car's paintwork.

'I don't like this,' said Tig, his chest tight. 'We need to go back.'

'Nothing to worry about,' said Dad, but Tig could see sweat breaking out on his forehead.

'We're not going to fit!' yelled Elsa – but it was too late.

The car had scraped between two trunks and got stuck. The tyres squealed and the doors began to buckle – the trees were squeezing them! They were going to be crushed like a grape in the hands of a giant.

'Dad! Please make it stop!' Tig screamed, panic clawing his insides.

'This is the way!' shouted Dad. 'We – wait! Quick! Empty your pockets!'

'What?' yelled Elsa. 'You've got to reverse!'

CRACK!

A jagged cut appeared in Tig's window, the pine needles reaching through the glass like witches' fingernails.

'Give me what's in your pockets!' Dad shouted. 'Now!'

Tig groped in his trouser pocket and brought out a pencil, Elsa a broken shoelace. Dad snatched up the objects, along with a penny from his own pocket, and flung them out of the window into the smothering arms

of the forest. At once the path widened, the trees leant back as if pushed by a strong wind and the car shot forward.

'What on earth just happened?' cried Elsa. She twisted to look at Tig. 'You all right?'

'Yeah . . .' panted Tig.

The crack on the window had vanished and now he couldn't remember if he'd imagined it.

'We're almost there,' said Dad, and Elsa and Tig leant forward in their seats.

The trees parted to reveal the pointed rooftops and softly glowing lights of a village, snuggled on the mountainside. Behind the village there was the dark outline of a tower, only just visible in the grey dawn. The forest encircled the tower as if it was an island surrounded by a green sea. Birds floated over the treetops like ash from a fire. Their road didn't enter the village; instead, it wound uphill back into the trees. They continued to climb until, at long last, the car stopped.

'Here we are,' said Dad, exhausted.

A grey cottage was set back from the lonely road, in the shadow of the trees. The windows were dark and empty. It was like a stone chest with unknown secrets locked within it. As he stared up at the cottage,

Tig remembered a line from the first letter – *all is not well in Grimhart* – and his heart skipped nervously. No sooner had he thought it, a light flickered in the empty house. There was someone inside.