



## CHAPTER ONE

**I T WAS A COLD OCTOBER MORNING,** and Alex Evans was doing fine, really. Absolutely fine.

She got up and made her bed—perfectly, sheets as smooth as a frozen pond—then brushed the knots from her hair until it was perfectly straight. She went to her desk, triple-checking her homework from the night before and dividing it between two plastic trays—one labeled “school homework,” the other “home homework.” She noticed her bedsheets had come loose at one corner and went to fix them. A voice called from next door:

“Did you make your bed, darling?”

“Yes, Mum,” she replied calmly.

Alex circled today’s date on the calendar that took up one wall of her room; months, weeks, days, hours, all filled in with her mum’s red handwriting. Today’s first instruction read: *6:30 a.m.—violin practice, fifteen minutes.* She glanced at her violin where it leaned haughtily

against her bedside table. She noticed her sheets had slipped again and went to fix them.

“All fine,” she said calmly, and then practiced her smile in the mirror—perfectly, teeth showing, eyes slightly crinkled. She spotted a smudge of pen ink on her lip and kept rubbing at it until it went away. She put on her school uniform, adjusting her tie until it was perfectly tight.

“Did you remember to do your tie properly this time?” came her mum’s voice again.

Alex pulled her tie tighter, her collar digging into her neck.

“Yes, Mum,” she said, very calmly. She went to get her blazer but tripped on the leg of her desk, violin shuddering in outrage as she knocked into her bedside table. She winced, rubbing her toe.

“Everything okay, my dove?”

“Fine,” she said, very, very calmly, and hopped toward the mirror. “Everything’s fine.”

She put on her blazer; button one, button two, button three. Button four flew off, pinging from the mirror and striking her on the nose. She stared at her reflection. Her eyelid twitched. In the mirror she noticed her bedsheets had come loose again.

Alex took a deep breath.

She turned, walking silently from her bedroom, down the stairs, out the front door, into the cold morning light. She walked up the empty street, toward the old forest at the edge of town. She walked through the trees—straight-backed, blank-faced, perfectly, perfectly calm. Finally she came to a stop in a little clearing. And for a moment she did nothing.

Then, Alex ripped off her tie, threw back her head, and screamed as loudly as she could.

It was like a bomb had detonated in her chest. The noise rang unstopably from her lips, scratching her throat, sad and terrible and painful to hear. Yet with each second she felt lighter, cooler inside. As if poison was being drained right out of her.

Finally, when Alex had no more scream left to give, the sound collapsed to a tiny moan, and she fell against a tree, catching her breath in little gulps. She was extremely glad that nobody had been there to see her.

“Well, that was an odd thing to watch on a Tuesday morning.”

Alex gasped, turning to find a man standing behind her, wearing a cloak the color of autumn leaves. He was the largest person she had ever seen, with dark-brown skin and a tall crown of dreadlocks, and his eyes sparkled with curiosity, as if his day had just become much, much more interesting.

Alex took a step backward. “Who are you? What are you doing in my forest?”

“Ah, it’s *your* forest, is it?” said the man, in a voice like gentle thunder. “Excellent, I was hoping to talk to the owner. What was all that about, then?”

“What was what about?” said Alex, much too quickly.

The man’s eyes crinkled in amusement. “I see. That’s the game we’re playing, is it?”

“I was just, um . . . clearing my throat.”

“Of course. When I clear my throat it also makes a noise like a hundred angry, dying cats.”

"You sound Scottish," said Alex, hoping to change the subject.

"Aye, we've been known to migrate south in the winter. Ever been? Beautiful countryside, lovely people. Did it make you feel better?"

"Scotland?"

The man smiled. "Clearing your throat."

"Oh." Alex shuffled her feet. "Yes. A little." She considered the hard, painful knot in her stomach. "For a bit."

"Anything you'd like to talk about?"

She shook her head. "I'm fine. Everything's fine."

"Aye, people who are fine always say, 'I'm fine, everything's fine,' while their left eye twitches. It's not good to keep things bottled up, you know. You might do something weird, like march into a forest and scream at a stranger."

Alex rubbed her nose. "It wasn't weird," she muttered quietly.

The man's face scrunched into an expression of great discomfort. "It was a *little* weird."

"Yeah, well . . . you're weird. Who dresses like that?"

"What do you mean?" He looked down at himself in affront. "These are my best traveling clothes. At least I'm not trapped in some itchy gray prison of a uniform like you. You're missing a button, by the way."

"I *know*," said Alex.

"Ah, you still seem a wee bit angry. Do you need to scream again?"

"What are you doing here, anyway?"

"Hunting."

"*Hunting?* Hunting for what?"

"Umm . . . bears."

"There's no bears in Britain."

He shrugged. “Depends where you look.”

Alex wrinkled her nose and checked her watch. Her day had taken a very strange turn, and it wasn’t even seven o’clock. “I need to go home.”

The man gazed over Alex’s head, as if her scream was still hanging there. “Are you sure home is the best place for you?”

Alex turned away. “I’m fine. I just have to . . . stay focused. Everything will be fine if I just do as I’m told.”

“Hmm . . .” The man studied her. “Never seen a bird so eager to lock its own cage before.”

Alex glowered at him, wanting to argue but lacking the words and the bravery. The man’s face lit up in a smile. “Well, I best be going, important business to attend to.”

“Yeah.” Alex raised an eyebrow. “Those bears aren’t going to hunt themselves.”

“No . . . no, indeed, they should be careful. There’re lots of strange things in this forest today.” The man pulled his cloak about himself, watching her with a shrewd expression. “You have a nice day now . . . *feeling fine.*”

With that he turned and marched deeper into the forest, unnaturally quiet for someone so large. Alex shivered, shaken up by their conversation, angry at him, or at something, anyway. She kicked what she thought was a stick but was actually a tree root, then limped back toward town. “I *am* fine,” she told herself grumpily. “Everything’s fine.”

She just had to keep looking forward. Do her homework. Go to school. Not let herself get distracted. Because if she stopped to think too much that’s when her stomach started to hurt, when the anger began to burn. She had to keep things sensible, simple. Small. She had to stop hoping that her life would get bigger.

Something glinted darkly in the undergrowth, catching Alex's eye. She frowned, stepping over cautiously, kneeling for a closer look. It was sticking out from a large rock somehow, crawled over by agitated woodlice. What was it doing in her forest?

Alex brushed away the insects and eased it out, careful not to slice herself on it. It was jagged and triangular, stretching from her wrist to her fingertips. Shiny. Inky black. Sharp enough to have cut through solid rock.

A tooth.