Chapter 1

The Stranger in the Fog

Birkenbrück, the present day

Grace woke with a piece of rope in her hand.

At least, that was what she thought until she opened her fingers. It was the drawstring of her pajamas. She had pulled it so tight that the waistband dug into her stomach.

Her phone on the nightstand read 6:12. Outside, the garbage truck backed into the alley with a long beep. The driver swore at something Grace couldn't see. The smell of burned toast drifted up from the apartment below.

She lay still and waited for the room to become her room again.

The crooked wardrobe. The chair with her jeans draped over it. The books she kept meaning to buy another shelf for. No broken staircase. No bell.

Only the feeling of a kiss lingered on her forehead.

By eight, she was in the bookbinding workshop, trying to give a cookbook from the previous century a new spine. On the open page, someone explained how to stuff six pigeons with butter and nutmeg. Grace felt the pigeons should have been allowed to object.

“You’ve folded that the wrong way,” her aunt Nora said.

Grace took a closer look. So she had.

“It’s a new technique,” Grace joked.

“Then today we stop using it.”

Nora slid a mug of tea toward her. She had one pencil in her hair and another behind her ear because she had spent the past hour looking for the first one. Grace silently pointed to her head. Nora pulled out the pencil, gave it a reproachful look, and laid it beside the press.

“Another bad night?”

Grace nodded.

The workshop occupied the ground floor of an old house in Birkenbrück. A sign above the door read BOOKBINDING. The gold lettering had flaked away at one corner. Grace liked the house, even if the heat clanked and the window beside her bed whistled whenever the wind came from the east. Since her twentieth birthday, she had lived in the little apartment upstairs and worked as an apprentice downstairs. It was the first time she’d had a refrigerator of her own. So far, it mostly held yogurt, mustard, and things she couldn’t remember buying.

“Would you like to tell me what you dreamed about this time?” Nora asked.

Grace smoothed a wrinkle in the linen on the worktable.

“I’m in a tower. There’s a storm outside, and part of the staircase has collapsed. A man is there with me.”

“Someone you know?”

Grace hesitated.

“While I’m dreaming, I know who he is. But when I wake up, I can’t even remember his name.”

Nora waited. She was good at asking a question without immediately piling three more on top of it.

“When I wake up, I miss him,” Grace said at last. The words sounded foolish as soon as she said them.

Nora perched on the edge of a stool.

“How long have you been having these dreams?”

“Since I found Grandma’s box.”

The box had been behind the winter sweaters on the top shelf of Adelheid’s wardrobe. Grace and Nora had waited months before clearing out her apartment. Some things had been easy: expired spices, old electric bills, a broken desk lamp. When they reached Adelheid’s slippers, Grace had shut the wardrobe door again and said she needed some air.

Inside the box were a leather notebook and a silver pendant on a thin chain.

“She used to show it to me all the time,” Grace said. “But she never let me play with it.”

“Adelheid had her ways.” Nora took a sip of tea. “Once she almost wouldn’t let me in the house

because I wanted to throw out her old station clock."

Grace smiled. Her grandmother had talked to objects. Not constantly, but when something stuck, she would explain at length why it really needed to pull itself together. Grace had assumed it was something older people did. Lately she had caught herself doing it whenever the book press squeaked.

She drew the pendant out from under her sweater by its chain.

It was roughly the size of a quarter. Two narrow silver arcs fitted together to form a circle. Fine lines were engraved in the silver. One was longer than the others; Grace could trace it with her fingernail. The metal had dulled over the years.

The thin chain was long enough for the pendant to rest against her chest beneath her sweater.

Nora leaned forward.

"Pretty. Would you like me to have it cleaned?"

"I'd rather not."

The answer came so fast that it startled them both.

Grace tucked the pendant beneath her sweater. For the rest of the morning, she concentrated on the cookbook. She cut linen, mixed paste, and slipped sheets of parchment paper between the pages. Around noon, a customer brought in a worn-out children's book. He wanted it repaired for his granddaughter. When he explained that his own

mother had read it to him, he held the book so carefully it seemed he thought it could hear.

Grace took the job. She liked that her work held together things people still needed.

That evening, she walked up the hill behind town.

She had often gone there with her grandmother. Adelheid knew hardly any of the stars by name, but would declare with great confidence that the one on the left had to be important. They would sit on a bench, drink peppermint tea from a thermos, and wait until Grace grew sleepy.

Now the bench was wet. Grace sat down anyway.

Lights came on in Birkenbrück below. Fog hung over the river. She heard a train cross the bridge, and then it was quiet.

Beneath her sweater, the amulet grew warm. At first Grace thought she was imagining it. Then she felt a faint trembling against her skin.

She pulled the amulet out and laid it in her palm, leaving the chain around her neck.

It grew warmer still.

She studied the two arcs. Neither moved. Yet she could feel the trembling all the way to her fingertips.

Then the pendant lifted slightly off her palm.

Grace held her breath. There was a narrow gap between her skin and the silver. The chain still hung loosely from her neck. She wasn't pulling on it.

But the amulet was floating.

Grace jumped up, knocking the thermos off the bench.

She closed her fingers around the silver. The trembling stopped. The chain was still around her neck.

A bell rang out of the fog.

Grace knew the church bell. It had served as her second alarm every morning since she moved above the workshop. This was a different bell. Deeper. Closer.

For a moment, the air smelled of seawater.

“Hello?”

She could hear the fear in her own voice.

Nobody answered. But someone moved below the slope. A man in a long coat appeared between the trees, then vanished.

Grace could have gone home. Later, she would think often about that simple fact. No invisible hand had pulled her onward. She had picked up her thermos, screwed the lid on, and chosen to walk through the park.

A man in a long coat stood at the park entrance. Grace thought he was the one she had just seen between the trees on the hillside.

He was barely older than she was. Dark hair fell across his forehead. His coat was missing a button, and he carried a battered portfolio under one arm. He looked at her as though he had spent hours preparing something to say and had just forgotten it.

Grace stopped several paces away.

“Were you on the hill just now?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Are you following me?”

“No. I think I’m too late.”

“For what?”

He looked at the silver pendant she was still holding. His eyes widened a little.

“Does that belong to you?”

Grace tucked the pendant back under her sweater.

“That’s none of your business.”

“Sorry. Of course.” He raised the portfolio slightly. “I’d like to show you something. You don’t have to come any closer.”

He set it on a bench and stepped back.

Grace waited. Then she approached.

A drawing lay on top. A tower with its dome torn open. A broken beam above a staircase. A table covered in star charts.

A small ship was sketched on the wall beside the door.

A dog stood on its deck.

Grace could no longer hear the traffic behind her.

“Where did you get this?”

“From my dreams,” the man said.

