

CHAPTER TWO

People in novels talk about how, in a crisis, a few seconds can stretch into hours, a lifetime, an eternity. You can feel like you age ten years in a heartbeat, or that the world around you has just progressed into the next century when no more than a few chaotic, tumultuous minutes have truly passed.

I'd never believed in that phenomenon until a petrified troll damned near crushed my chest on the Burke-Gilman trail. From that moment on, though, I was sold. It couldn't have been more than a minute or two that I stayed there flat on my back, panting, tears of shock and panic blurring the face of the frozen horror just above me, but it felt like decades. My mind fired off incoherent, random thoughts with dizzying speed, and in those impossibly elongated moments, each thought jangled inside me like an insane doorbell.

What the hell is this thing?

What in the name of God just happened?

It just turned to stone, things don't turn to stone, not even monsters!

Holy crap, a monster, a real monster, it was going to kill me, it was going to kill that guy!

Oh God.

The man who'd tried to help me was hurt.

Time snapped back to its normal rate as I shoved the brand new statue off of me, an effort that left me sweating and trembling, every muscle in my arms seemingly afire. Part of me wanted to giggle at the sight of my Swiss Army knife sticking up out of its back as it toppled over onto the ground, but I recognized the impulse for what it was—hysteria—and wrestled it down. I had to get to my rescuer.

He was still down but not entirely out, and as I skittered on hands and knees to his side he tried to turn his head in my direction. Mistake, that. His face twisted with pain, and though I'd never had a day of medical training, I didn't need any to figure out that the swelling, bleeding bump along his hairline where he'd been clocked with his own staff was the cause of his expression.

"Take it easy, buddy," I blurted, striving to level out my voice and blink the tears out of my eyes as I leaned over him. I tried to hide my wince at the bump, too. It looked nasty, like it ought to be Exhibit A in a textbook on Knowing Your Concussions, Great and Small. "That thing just about walloped

you into next week. You got a real bad knock on the head, okay? I'm going to get you some help, but you've got to take it easy."

The urgency of the fight had faded beneath a growing glaze over his eyes, and from the way he squinted uncertainly up at me I suspected he saw two or three of me rather than just the one. "Troll," he muttered, his already accent-slurred voice blurring further as he struggled to sit up. "What happened to the..."

So that's what it was. That same hysterical corner of my brain gibbered at the prospect of reality containing something that could be labeled 'troll'. Unconvinced that the stone shape lying nearby wouldn't reanimate and try to rip my head off, I forced myself to keep ignoring it. A guy with a head injury was sprawled before me; I didn't have the luxury of freaking out. And even one little glance at the troll statue was a panic fit waiting to happen.

"Stick it on top of a skyscraper, it'll make a great gargoyle!" I piped, plastering on a smile and praying the stranger was too stunned to notice how it wobbled. "Don't worry about it. Just lie still and I'll see if I can get—whoa, hey, what part of 'lie still' aren't you getting?"

I grabbed the guy, for in spite of my warning he hauled himself up onto his elbows, apparently determined to tackle something way too adventurous for a man in his condition: getting up. My arms got in his way, and he couldn't seem to summon the strength to elude them; instead he sagged back

against me.

That much was okay. He was far lighter than the troll, both before and after petrification, a reassuringly warm and human-shaped weight. And he smelled a lot better, too. But as he slumped against me that little prickling I'd felt before came back, and this time it was stronger. It thrummed through the man I held, gathering at the place where his head drooped against my shoulder and spreading out from there into me, like electric current following wires out from a socket.

Shock, I decided. Weird things happened to people in shock. This, however, was weird enough that just for a second or two my mind went entirely blank except for the sense of that current humming between us.

Then I shook it off. The stranger looked about to take a jaunt into unconsciousness land, and that threatened to call back my panic. I had no idea how to help a man with a head wound, aside from finding the nearest phone and calling 911-

No, I corrected myself, not one head wound. Two. Blood oozed out of the bump at his hairline, reddening his dark disheveled hair, but that didn't explain the dampness where his head now rested against me.

Nor did it explain, as it soaked through my biking shirt onto my skin, why that place was where the prickling was strongest.

"Focus, girl!" I hissed at myself, and glanced at the

grass. There was a patch of scarlet there, too. Had he smacked his head on the back as well as the front when he'd hit the ground? I could buy that. The troll had hit him hard enough.

Great. Just great.

"Hang in there," I begged then, fighting down the urge to shake him to keep him awake, fighting to stay calm and block my own strange, shocky reactions out of immediate thought. If he fainted, no way I'd move him; he was too big.

But was it safe to leave an injured man anywhere near the former troll?

That clinched it. I didn't want to stay near that thing for another second, and on the off chance it stopped being a gruesome lawn ornament and resumed being a troll, I didn't want to leave my rescuer in its proximity either. So I started to move, curling his arm around my neck so I could pull him up with me as I stood. "We're getting out of here, pal," I said, "so help me out. Stay with me. You're going to have to hang onto me, and you're going to have to walk!"

As I hauled the stranger to his feet I spotted the staff—a weapon. I liked that idea. A lot. So I seized it along with its owner, and lurched upright with both. It took doing, with one arm looped around my companion's waist and the other hand clutching at the sturdy wood—both for reassurance and for support to get up.

But I did it. As we rose, he came around enough to peer

bemusedly at what remained of the creature that had attacked us.

"Turned to stone," he croaked, his brows knitting together.

"Stone... cold iron... how'd you know...?"

Too busy with getting us mobile, I only half-heard him. "Steel Swiss Army knife," I chirped, far more blithely than I felt. Especially when my bike was pretty much destroyed, and the contents of my patch kit were still strewn around it. But it couldn't be helped. I'd have to come back for the bike's remains later. "Not all that cold. C'mon, big guy, move it! We can't stay here!"

"You saw it? The troll... saw it for what it was?"

"Less talk. More move. Come on!"

I stand about five foot six. The man had six, maybe eight inches on me, and while he wasn't Schwarzenegger in the build department, he wasn't a scarecrow either. As we stumbled along the trail he nearly pitched me to my knees several times with the awkward effort of keeping him moving. But I kept up a half-hobbling, half-trotting pace even when my every nerve screamed for me to run home as fast as I could go, lock all the doors, and not come out for the next six years. I overruled my nerves by scolding them that the hurt stranger wouldn't pull off three steps without me, and it was my fault that he was now a card-carrying member of the concussion club in the first place.

This was what I got for having a conscience.

Stupid conscience.

I avoided thinking about what we were leaving behind, and how a monster which should not exist—and which should not, if it did exist, under any circumstances turn into a rock model of a monster—was lying back there in open view and broad though waning daylight. My aforementioned conscience argued that some other hapless soul might stumble across the troll. Since I had no way of knowing whether its current state was permanent, I was running the risk of someone else getting hurt.

But I ignored both my conscience and my nerves, unable to do anything more to satisfy either shrieking portion of my psyche. I would by God make it home, because I had no other option. I'd help this man who'd tried to help me. One hurt person at a time was all I was able to handle.

That was just going to have to do.

* * *

By bike, the spot on the trail where the troll had ambushed me was less than two minutes from my house. On foot and with a wounded man slowing me down it was closer to five, but it seemed to take more on the order of three or four years. There were closer houses than mine, and yeah, I probably should have gone to one of them for the sake of getting the fastest possible help. But with the fight part of the emergency over (I hoped), flight mode had kicked in, and my feet didn't want to stop till

I got somewhere certifiably safe. Since I lived so close to the trail, my head was willing to humor my feet and let them aim for my phone rather than a phone. Ergo, home.

My street doesn't particularly stand out from any other in Seattle, especially near the lake. Its houses are renovated duplexes, its yards multi-layered sculptures of flowerbeds, wood shavings, and rain-nourished grass shaded by Japanese maples and conifers. Trellises, twined with climbing roses and ivy, adorn sidewalks and driveways alike. Everything looked as it should as I hauled the stranger along with me to the duplex I shared with friends, a male couple in their forties: peaceful in the summer evening, blessedly monster-free. No further trolls leapt out of the bushes (which would have been bad) and no further helpful passersby crossed our path (which would have been good), and we made it to my front porch without incident.

My rescuer swayed alarmingly as I helped him up the two shallow steps to my door. I didn't blame him; I was on the verge of collapse myself. But I propped him and his staff against the nearest wall, fumbled my keys out of the smallest pocket of my backpack, and got the door open so we could get inside. "C'mon, buddy," I encouraged him, dimly aware that my voice came out high and strained, but unable to do a thing about it. "Just in here now... this is my place... here, careful. Lean on me. There you go!"

Once we crossed my threshold, the scrabble of heavy feline

paws gave me about two seconds of warning before Fortissimo galloped in from the kitchen and plowed straight into my ankles. Apparently he'd gotten over his snit about being dragged off to the vet, and reverted to his nightly practice of squalling to be fed at the thunderous volume that gave him his name. Food is a mighty motivator for my cat—and yes, he does in fact gallop. In between avoiding both his claws and his teeth, the vet had weighed him in at twenty-five pounds, and Fort's deep passion for tuna aside, I'm still not convinced he isn't a cat-sized horse.

"Not now, cat," I groaned. With both hands occupied, I had to use a foot to kick the door closed behind me and then nudge my aggravated pet out of the way. The man at my side was trying to use the staff for support, but he leaned far more heavily on me—and every muscle in my body pleaded to get him sitting down. My shoulders, arms, and entire right side where he leaned quivered with exertion, and once I levered him onto the couch the rush of circulation back into those parts of me almost dropped me where I stood.

Mechanically, doggedly, I kept moving. I had to. The stranger was still bleeding.

"Don't move," I told him, and then bolted into the kitchen. Fortissimo galloped after me, hoping for food, but I didn't stop to soothe his disappointment. Feeding the cat would just have to wait; right then my brain had no room for anything besides

phoning for help, and cobbling together some first aid out of my pitifully limited knowledge and supplies.

First, the landline phone. I allowed myself a few moments to deliberate as I grabbed an ice pack out of the freezer and every clean dishtowel I had: 911; or Carson and Jake, my housemates? I'd need transport to the hospital either way, but the boys won out. Though he'd retired early, Jake had worked for ten years as an EMT, and if I trusted anybody to tell me what to do for the injured guy in my living room, I trusted him.

Besides, right then I really needed to hear a familiar voice.

With unsteady fingers I dialed Carson's cell number. Jake picked up on the first ring, and a tide of relief crashed over me at the sound of his tenor voice on the other end of the line. "Hello?"

"Jake, it's Kendis! I need your help, there's been an accident—"

His tone immediately sharpened. "Tell me what happened. Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm okay—" More or less. Mostly less. But I kept moving, hurrying back into the living room with my hands full and the phone jammed between my ear and shoulder. That effort cost me. Even as I knelt down in front of the man on my couch, I couldn't keep a tremor out of my voice. "But I've got this guy here, he's bleeding—he hit his head—I need you to tell me what

to do for him! I've got an icepack, towels..."

"Put pressure on the wound, and if there's swelling, the icepack too," Jake ordered, going into what had to have been his EMT voice. "Is he conscious?"

"Yeah," I reported, more steadily; Jake's tone was helping me get a grip on my nerves. "He's awake. Mostly!"

My rescuer sat with his head bowed forward into trembling hands, his elbows propped onto his denim-clad knees. This gave me a view of the thick ponytail that draped down along his neck and collar, a mass of unruly waves the approximate shade of toasted honey, held in haphazard check by a simple blue elastic band. Or at least, it used to be blue. Though the back of his head wasn't as bad off as the front, there was enough blood back there to stain the band a disconcerting red. Following Jake's instructions, I wrapped the icepack in one of the towels and pressed it against his scalp, which prompted a strangled grunt out of him. He jerked his head back up so I could see his face.

I whimpered. I couldn't help it. He was so pale, so gray-cheeked underneath two or three days' worth of beard, that I wondered for a crazed, irrational instant if he was going to turn to stone too.

Jake must have caught the noise over the phone, for he prodded me, "Talk to me, Kendis!"

"Sorry! I'm on it—I've got the icepack on his head. With a towel."

"Keep it there. If the towel soaks through, put another one on it, and don't let up on the pressure! Has he lost consciousness at all?"

"Not yet, but he's kind of out of it!"

"Has he thrown up?"

"No, but he kind of looks like he might!"

Another voice spoke in the background, a deep rumble I could barely make out. Carson. Jake's voice went quieter for a second or two while he updated his partner; then he came back on to talk to me. "Carson and I are on our way home from the store. If we're not there in five minutes, or if your friend passes out or throws up, call 911. Do you understand?"

"Yeah, I got it. I was going to call 911 if I couldn't get you guys. Hurry! Please!"

Jake promised speed; I babbled out a thank-you and hung up, letting the phone drop to the floor. That left me with the stranger.

"Hi," I offered, summoning a quavering little smile, "my name's Kendis, and I'll be your volunteer nurse this evening. At least till I can get you to a real nurse. How you doing, big guy?"

At first he didn't answer me, only stared at me with dazed eyes out from under the towel-wrapped icepack. Now that I had a hand free I grabbed another towel, but while I did, something behind my breastbone tightened up at the intensity of his gaze.

Even clobbered upside the head he had the most penetrating stare I'd ever seen—and it brought back that odd prickling, making me hyperaware of the small, damp spots on my shirt, of the wet warmth soaking into the towel I pressed to the back of his head, and his sheer physical presence.

But at last he rasped, "Head's kind of sore."

"Yeah, I'll bet." Another weird note entered my voice, on top of the fright I'd already heard there; I sounded shy, I realized. Did it matter? I tried not to let it or the inexplicable prickling distract me as I kept up the pressure with both of my hands. "You got a name to go with that big whapping stick of yours?" Humor. Maybe that'd distract him from his pain and me from my shyness and fear. "Don't tell me. You're Robin Hood and that's your buck-and-a-quarter quarterstaff. Funny, you had a bill in the cartoon."

That got me a tiny upward curl of one corner of my rescuer's mouth, but no abatement of the staring. His bewilderment was unmistakable, and I couldn't parse what caused it: double vision, his own shock from what had happened on the trail, pain, or my nose having turned fluorescent green. I made no assumptions. What with the sharp turn into the Twilight Zone the evening had taken so far, assumptions didn't seem prudent.

Neither did any acknowledgement of that current rippling between us, not if it was just a shock-induced side effect of the entire incident—but I almost opened my mouth to ask him if

he felt it too. Before I could, he said, "Christopher MacSimidh."

Delivered in his blurred voice, his last name was practically unintelligible. What I thought I heard was 'mikshimmik', but I didn't want to make assumptions with that either. It sounded Scottish, which matched his accent. Or did it? My head threatened to whirl if I thought about it too hard—that way lurked a mental replay of the troll ambush, and the panic fit waiting to break free. I still couldn't afford a panic fit. So I stopped trying to think too much.

'Christopher' had been clear enough, though, and I kind of liked it; the length of it suited him. A man his size needed a three-syllable name. "Hey, Christopher," I answered, smiling a little more to hide my worry. Fort butted peremptorily at my legs, yowling an indignant reminder that he still hadn't been fed. I kept right on ignoring him. "You feel like turning down the bleeding? It'll probably do you good, you know? Between the grass back there on the trail, your clothes, and mine, you've lost a whole bunch of blood, and—"

"The grass?" Christopher interrupted me, his already ashen features losing what little color they had left, which on his best day probably wasn't much at all compared to mine. His hands shot out to clutch with strength an injured man had no business possessing at my shoulders. His sudden motion nearly dislodged my grip on the towel and the icepack, but I managed to keep them

both in place. "I bled on the grass?"

Was he delirious? I was definitely sensing something strange every time I touched him, but it didn't feel like fever. And no fever was going to happen this fast after an injury, surely? So what was the big deal? I paused and hedged, "Yeah, but it's okay, really, next good rain'll wash it away.."

I trailed off. Christopher's attention had slid away from my face, and now on top of looking injured he looked terrified. He hadn't looked terrified rushing to my defense, but he did now. The sight of it unnerved me. It was too bizarre, yet another jarring note of oddity in what was already hands down the oddest night I had ever experienced. "That's it, then," he mumbled—and before I could stop him he shot up halfway to his feet. "I-I've got to leave before the city claims me... I've got..."

Just before he tumbled to the floor I caught him, staggering backwards a step or two to take his weight without falling, though I couldn't keep hold of the icepack and towels. My right foot hit Fort, who let out a wrathful screech, slashed at my heel, and streaked off like a stripy orange comet down the hallway. I bit back a screech of my own and made a mental note to apologize to the cat later, with catnip. Till then I focused on hanging onto Christopher and maneuvering him back onto the couch.

"Only place you're going is the hospital," I insisted, getting as much of a grip as I could on his shirt. "I can't

stitch up your head for you, and you sure as hell can't do it yourself! Sit still!"

Christopher sat, but he clung to me with the sort of tenacity you'd expect out of a drowning sailor who's just found the last remaining fragment of a life raft—or a man with a concussion holding onto anything that could keep him steady in a room that had to be doing pirouettes around him. "Got to go," he whispered, voice weakening, rising slightly in pitch while his accent grew more pronounced. His gaze intercepted mine once more; their earlier amber-green glare was muted now, far closer to brown and dulled by increasing confusion. "Fey t'ings here already, walkin' in daylight... you saw it. Eyes like that, shinin', and you saw it..."

He stared at me so intently that my nervousness redoubled. For the briefest instant, so did that prickling current. And like someone in a dream he added, "Are they supposed to be that color?"

Then he fainted, just as I heard the squeal of tires in the driveway outside, the slam of two car doors, and heavy footsteps on the porch. Audible even through the front door, Carson's gruff, anxious bass voice bellowed, "Kendie? Kiddo? We're here, we're coming in!"

I'd been relieved to get Jake on the phone, but that was nothing compared to hearing them coming home now. I hadn't bothered to lock the door; there hadn't been time. Nor did

Carson bother with keys. Not slowed down for an instant by the door, he simply came charging in, only to do a visible double take at the sight of me holding up an unconscious, bleeding stranger in the living room.

But I didn't give him a chance to demand an explanation. The cavalry had arrived, and my mind took advantage of it with the next frantic word that left my mouth.

"Help!"