

THE WATCH

Chapter 1

When the rain stopped we left the doorway and began to run. It was dark, but the streetlights cast an electric blue glow, flickering beautiful and eerie against the wet pavement, casting patterns on the drifting mist. I wished we could run in the light. Instead we ran in the shadow of the rough cinderblock wall that divided the street from the houses.

The wall had cameras on both sides, but Meritt knew which eyes were blind. He led me back and forth from the street side to the house side, through the intermittent gaps in the wall, weaving us through the web of invisible threads so that none of them ever touched us.

We ran a long way, through air that was crisp and damp and smelled like autumn leaves, and it felt good to run, to pour the tension of the past week into sweat and breath and motion. Tomorrow the tight fist of anxiety in my chest would be back, but tonight, running hard through the wet forbidden streets, I could breathe.

When the white spotlight from the watchtower swept toward us we paused, pressing against the rough wall; when it passed, we eased out and ran again. Meritt kept pace with me until the houses ended, until the street and wall ran past nothing but orchards and empty stubbled ground. Then he let loose and raced ahead, hurtling through black shadows and pockets of blue light.

I couldn't keep up with him; I didn't even try. Instead I slowed to push a stray lock of hair back under my black cap as a few belated raindrops pattered down, cold against my hot skin, and the rising breeze sent the sharp tang of fermenting windfall apples wafting past. Breathing deep, I tasted the damp night air, felt the

last knots of tension relax in my shoulders, my neck. This was good. This was the happiest I ever was, out running with Meritt in the dark.

Ahead of me Meritt turned and raised a hand, trying to get me to hurry. He didn't call to me because we weren't supposed to be out this late, we weren't supposed to be here, we weren't supposed to be together, and we certainly weren't supposed to be meeting Rafe.

But I didn't want to hurry. I was tired, and he knew he was faster. It wouldn't hurt him to slow down and wait for me. So I waved back, cheerily, as if he were just waving to be friendly.

He shook his head at me, reproofing. He was still moving, jogging backwards, and as we pantomimed our little argument he veered a bit, away from the wall, into the glow of the electric blue lights. They caught at the sharp planes of his face, danced in his unruly black hair, and a cold fist formed in my stomach and I stopped moving altogether.

He didn't look like himself. He didn't look like the Meritt I'd known all my life. The street was dark and empty and we were all alone, and he had turned to light and shadow, wrong-colored, frightening and strangely beautiful.

He looked like the things in the woods.

Now he was truly exasperated, spreading his arms wide—*what are you doing?*—but I couldn't move. I put one hand against the wall beside me, feeling its rough surface, the cold damp scratchiness of it, and it was hard and real and kept me upright while my vision darkened and then cleared, lightheadedness passing when I remembered that breathing was a good thing, remembered, too, that there weren't really things in the woods. Those were stories, nothing more. Bogeymen to keep people in line.

Or so I hoped.

The white spotlight swept toward us again and Meritt backed against the wall, but I was still paralyzed. The light flashed in my eyes, blinding me, and all I could do was stand frozen and try not to attract attention with any sudden movement. We mustn't get caught. Bad things happened to people who got caught breaking the rules—prison time, cut rations, reassignment to the worst

jobs. I didn't know what exactly the wardens would do to me if they caught me out after curfew, and I didn't want to find out.

Then the spotlight moved on and my eyes adjusted to the dark and I saw Meritt up ahead, looking like himself again, grimacing wryly at me. With one last adamant sweep of his arm—*come on*—he spun and sprinted toward the end of the street, toward the opening in the other wall, the outer one that circled the entire city.

After one last deep breath, feeling my head clear and my heart unclench, I started running too.

We were meeting Rafe outside the outer wall, in the broad stretch of sand and scraggly grass that marked the boundary between the city and the woods. We called that strip of boundary the wasteland, but despite the ugly name we liked the place. It wasn't the suffocating city, and it wasn't the dangerous woods. We went there whenever we could, and this time Rafe would be there with us. He'd been one of our teachers back in school, my favorite because he was good at explaining things and, most of all, because he never treated me like an outcast or a freak. On bad days I pretended—secretly—that he was my father. If I loved anyone as much as Meritt, it was Rafe.

Slowly, throbbing through my veins, joy began to return. Meritt and Rafe, both at the same time. I felt a smile start and I leaned into the wind, running hard, while ahead of me Meritt sprinted full-out down a thin channel of shadow, his bare feet flashing, the muscles in his back moving beneath the gray uniform shirt, all of him lit in fits and starts by the blue light shifting and shining along the periphery.

That sight will always stay with me, that feeling. It was the last moment of *before*. I dream about it now, and I've dreamt it so often I can count Meritt's steps, hear the soft whistle of the rising wind, feel the last breath I drew in—too harsh, too loud—when I saw what was going to happen and had to bite back a shout, had to stop again and let him go.

She was standing in the shadows against the wall. I saw her before Meritt did, but there was nothing I could do to warn him. She stepped out when he was only a split second away, blocking his path, her white-blonde hair glinting in the

electric blue lights. In that last second before Meritt's body blocked my view, I saw that she was smiling. My own smile was still on my lips, stiff and empty, as if she had taken its soul.

Meritt skidded to a stop. He was going too fast and would have slammed into her, but he jerked sideways at the very last second and ricocheted into the wall instead. I felt the impact in my own shoulder, saw him reach up and grab his own.

She took a step toward him. He backed away, glancing around, checking his options, but he didn't look at me; he would never give me away.

Then there was noise, sounds I couldn't decipher, muted thumps and thuds. An odd electric smell simmered in the air, cast a metallic taste in the back of my throat.

The woman came forward another pace and the blue light shone on her face and I recognized her for certain, then—the blonde hair pulled tightly back from her face, the black warden's uniform that did nothing to hide her figure. She had been watching Meritt for months, swallowing him with her eyes when he passed on the street. I'd seen her do it; I'd told him so.

She held up a hand—*stop*—and spoke. I heard her voice but not her words.

Meritt reached up and clasped his hands on top of his head.

Staying deep in the shadows of the rough wall, I began to creep closer. I had to be careful—wardens rarely traveled alone. I had to be careful—but I made a mistake, the second one that night. My bare foot touched a cold puddle of water and the water rippled out into the light.

Someone shouted.

My heart lurched.

But I wasn't the one being shouted at, I hadn't been seen—the shout had come from the wasteland, and there was another heavy thud, and now through the gap in the wall I could see shadows thrashing, dark and confused against the pale half-dead grass. A figure stumbled into the wedge of blue light spilling from the street, the silver in his hair glinting bright and distinctive. Rafe.

I saw him, but I couldn't believe my eyes. Rafe was so careful, always so careful, and wardens never ventured out into the wasteland, so close to the woods. Even they were afraid of the woods, afraid of the stories.

The female warden beside Meritt half turned, looking toward the wasteland. Meritt could have run then, while she was distracted, and I wanted him to run but he didn't and I understood why—he'd already been seen and recognized, and anyway how could we run when Rafe was in trouble?

Not that we could do anything to help. All I could do was stand there, hiding in the shadows, feeling like a coward but knowing Rafe would want me to stay out of sight.

Rafe turned from side to side, looking for an out, but he was surrounded. The wardens edged in, tightening their circle. They gestured to each other but didn't speak.

One lunged forward. He caught Rafe from behind, pinning his arms. Rafe lifted both legs and kicked another warden hard in the stomach. The man went down, doubling over, and the warden holding Rafe lost his balance, staggered sideways, taking Rafe with him so that they both ended up on the ground.

Rafe broke free and rolled to his feet. A cry rose in my throat—*run*—but I swallowed it and the third warden sprang, lunging fast. The low buzz of a stunner rang out, the smell of hot metal intensifying.

Rafe went limp, crumpling into an uneven shadow on the ground.

Like vultures the wardens swooped in, bending over him. Still they were silent—other than that first shout, the whole thing played out voicelessly. No one wanted to attract the attention of anything in the woods.

The wardens hauled Rafe upright. His hands were cuffed behind his back and he didn't have the strength to stand. He swayed, almost fell, and they caught him and half-dragged, half-carried him out of my line of sight.

And Meritt—Meritt was shifting slightly from side to side, his hands still clasped behind his head. It took me a second to understand: He was breathing, that was all. He was breathing the way he always did when he was opening his lungs after a hard run.

Why hadn't the blonde warden cuffed him?

Maybe she'd been distracted by the fight in the wasteland, but it was careless of her. Meritt could have gotten away.

Now she was gesturing toward the group in the wasteland. She was pointing at something. She was talking.

Meritt dropped his arms and shrugged.

The woman smiled.

She stepped toward Meritt and I thought she would finally cuff him. Instead she reached up and put her arms around his neck, tilting her face up to his.

I blinked hard, feeling suddenly chilled.

Then I turned my back on them, and started back the way I'd come.

It was what I'd promised to do if ever we ran into trouble, and I understood why I had to do it. All the same, I hated myself. Meritt and Rafe would never have run away and left me. They were the closest thing to family that I had.

The concrete felt colder against my bare feet, harder. I was alone and it was a long way back and the streets stretched before me, glinting blue and empty, smelling of rain and wet dead leaves. I was alone and I had to remember the cameras, had to avoid the eyes, I couldn't simply follow Meritt as I'd done before—Meritt had been caught, Rafe had been caught.

What would the wardens do to them?

The wind gusted, sending pale leaves spinning across my path like living things. Leaves from the woods, from the dying trees, from the place where strange things lived.

Only stories. They were surely only stories, and I knew I was thinking about the woods because that fear was a familiar fear, easier than thinking about what might be happening to Meritt and Rafe. I ran and tried not to stumble on stretches of crumbling pavement and tried to think of something to do, some way to help, but there was no one to tell, nothing to do, nothing except not getting caught myself—it would go worse for all of us if I got caught.

One house had not yet gone dark, and as I ducked my head to make myself smaller and passed through the faint halo of its lighted windows, somewhere, not far away, an engine growled to life. Yellow lights flashed on and cast hazy arcs through the mist up toward the sky.

I couldn't see the car because it was on the other side of the wall, but I could track its progress by those lights. Surely it would go toward the wasteland, toward the disturbance. Surely it would go toward Meritt and Rafe, not me.

No. The headlights turned in my direction, slowly, deliberately, like the eyes of an animal stalking its prey.

I was already running fast but now I ran faster. I was a good runner but fear was making my heart race, was throwing off my breathing, and the sharp pang of a stitch bit at my ribs. A half-fallen bicycle reared up in my path, then a stack of loose cinderblocks. I veered away from the wall to avoid them, then back into its dark protective shadow. The patrol car was louder, closer. I had to make it past the corner and back into my designated area before it reached me.

Laughter rang out ahead, then a curse. I'd forgotten—three old men sat in front of a dark house drinking. Meritt and I had seen them when we came past, had swung out into the blue of the streetlights to pass them on the other side of the wall. I couldn't do that now, not with the patrol car out there.

Maybe the men were too drunk to notice a girl darting past.

No such luck.

"Look at that," one called. "Hey, what're you doing out so late?"

"Come keep us company," another yelled.

"Warden!" shouted the third.

They kept calling out, mocking, entertained. I kept running, not even glancing toward them.

I heard the bottle spinning through the air a moment before it smashed and sent broken glass skittering across my path. Jerking sideways I leapt over it, and I didn't get cut but my cap came loose, sending a cascade of hair spilling past my shoulders. That was bad. If those men caught sight of my hair, they'd know exactly who I was. They'd tell the wardens. I could make no excuse.

The thought terrified me but all I could do was go on and hope the dark was dark enough.

I was getting close. One more block of houses and I'd reach the corner by the laundry building—the southern boundary of my area. If I got caught in my own area, and alone, I'd be in trouble but not nearly as much. I only had to pass one

more break in the wall where the sidewalk was exposed to the street. I was going to make it.

But just as I stretched to leap past the opening, past the point of exposure and into the relative safety of my own area, the yellow glare of headlights poured across the gap—a second patrol car coming from the other direction.

Skidding to a halt I flung myself down and against the rough cinderblock wall, sending a burning pain across my knee, tearing the leg of my pants. I grabbed at my hair, twisted it up and shoved it under my black cap.

A car door opened. I wanted to hold my breath, but I was too winded. All I could do was hold very still and try to gulp for air quietly.

Footsteps moved toward the gap in the wall, then stopped. I'd been annoyed by the rain earlier, but now I was glad for the clouds, the hidden moon. Though the street was blue with artificial light, my side of the wall—the sidewalk side—was cloaked in shadow. As long as no one came out of the house above me, spilling light from an open doorway, I was close to invisible.

The footsteps started again, moved closer. I crouched there stock-still, muscles tensed, feeling a trickle of blood where I'd scraped my knee. And now, for a moment, I did hold my breath. The air lay still and the silence was so complete that I imagined a drop of blood rolling off my knee, striking the pavement with an echoing splash, giving me away. I stared at the slanted rectangle of blue light that the gap let slip across the sidewalk, expecting any moment to see a shadow there, and then a warden.

Instead the steps resumed, receded. The car door slammed. The headlights shifted on the street and the patrol car growled away.

I didn't move. I could feel that I wasn't alone.

The white spotlight swept past, at this angle catching only the other side of the wall. For a long moment the night stretched out, sighed. A handful of leaves whispered around the corner, tumbled toward me.

I couldn't hold my breath any longer, so I let it out as quietly as I could and hoped it was quiet enough.

On the other side of the wall, someone moved, whispered. There was more than one of them, unless I'd heard only the rising wind, the leaves.

Another whisper. Not two feet away from me, on the other side of the wall.

My body screamed for me to leap up, run. My brain said no, staying put was still my best hope for escape. Don't move. Be part of the shadows, part of the night.

Then the clouds parted and the moon emerged, full and round, shining down clear and calm and bright, outdoing the electric blue lights, changing the shadows. The moonlight reached down and picked out the one part of me that wasn't pressed tightly enough against the wall—my left foot, heel braced on the ground, toes pointed up in the air. The moonlight struck it and cast a perfect shadow of its form, a foot with heel and toes, clear and unmistakable against the pavement in front of the gap.

Someone on the other side of the wall drew a sharp breath.

I scrambled to get my feet beneath me, to rush back the way I'd come. I took a step backward, turned, took one long leaping stride—and barreled straight into someone.

Meritt.

He put a hand over my mouth—not that I would have cried out—but I knew it was too late for silence, too late to hide. Someone was outside the wall, and any moment now he would step into view and pin us with his light. And unlike me, Meritt had been caught before.

All this flashed through my mind instantly, definitively. I wrenched myself out of his arms and pointed at him, then pointed back the way we'd come.

There was just time to register the quick series of expressions flitting across Meritt's face—disbelief, objection, dismay—to see him reaching to grab me and missing as I stepped beyond his grasp, pulled off my cap, shook out my hair, and plunged into the light.