

## Chapter 1

**M**y hair blew back from my face, twisting and whipping in the wind. The sea spray dampened it, making it curl and tangle, and when I licked my lips they tasted of salt.

We were going fast, cutting cleanly through the moonlit waves, and no one was having to row. Mal called this a catboat, but it didn't seem to have anything to do with cats, only with sails.

Mal was in the back of the boat holding the tiller and calling, now and then, for us to do something. Usually it was just to move out of the way of the sail, which wasn't always easy to do. Seven of us in a smallish boat wasn't ideal. But Mal insisted his boat was strong and stable, and we were traveling light.

"So they planned to go straight to the stockade," Earl said, speaking to Mal.

"That is right."

"Then we'll head for the stockade, too. Our first order of business is joining up with the others."

That wasn't my first order of business.

"There's no time," I said. "Meritt's in trouble and he might not even know it. And anyway we don't know how to get to the stockade."

Rain threw me a flat-eyed look and spoke to Earl as if I'd said nothing. "Wonderful," she said. "It'll be just like home. Dad can boss me around and forbid me to do anything useful."

"You might end up taking orders from my father instead," Fiona said sweetly.

Rain scowled at her. I was beginning to see how the family feud had persisted all those years.

"My father and my Uncle Eric are two peas in a pod," Rain said. "Though they'd never admit it. And I don't intend to take orders from anyone who didn't want me along."

"So you would take orders from someone else?" Mal said, and I looked at him in surprise. Did Mal actually banter?

Rain stared at him as if he'd grown an extra head.

"Perhaps it is me," Mal said, smiling at her. "Perhaps you will take orders from me."

Rain's stare grew cold. "Why on earth would I take orders from you?"

"Because I am the one making it possible for you to reach Optica." He gestured to his bare chest. "And because you like my designs."

Rain looked nonplussed.

Earl sighed.

"I know nothing about you," Rain said, recovering. "Boats and battles are completely different skill sets."

"Getting to the battle is half the battle," Mal said.

"Clever," Rain said. "But can you fight?"

"I believe I am fighting now." He winked at her.

At another time I might have enjoyed watching Rain be disconcerted, but I had to talk sense into the lot of them, and time was short.

"I'm not going to the stockade," I said, raising my voice to be clearly heard over the shushing water and the wind. "Meritt doesn't know he's in trouble. I have to tell him."

Everyone looked at me, and every face showed some degree of disagreement.

"But Red," Fiona said hesitantly. "It'll be so dangerous over there."

My sister hadn't exactly had good luck with her adventures thus far. She'd been drugged by Eric Alleyn the night before and drugged by the Dream Recorder that morning, and she wanted her Papa and her brothers. I could understand that, so I tried to speak gently.

"Of course it's dangerous," I said. "That's the point. That's why we're going."

Fiona ducked her head and I felt bad, but not bad enough to relent. "Meritt needs help," I said. "And no one else is willing to help him."

"I'm willing," Michael Alleyn said, and my heart lifted. If the watchmaker would take my side, Meritt might stand a chance.

Unfortunately, Michael's offer wasn't unconditional. "First, however, I must speak with your old Guardian. With luck he can help me fine-tune a few matters. And I will also need to enlist the aid of your brothers—people the Watchers presumably won't recognize—in order to make my plan work."

"What is your plan?"

The old watchmaker shook his head. "Not yet," he said. "Let me speak first with the Guardian, and take advice from him."

I didn't know this man well at all—we had only just found him—and I was hesitant to argue with him, given who he was. Still, Meritt had no one but me looking out for his interests.

"While you go find Sir Tom and my brothers, I'll go into the city to warn Meritt," I said. "He's in terrible danger, immediate danger. There's no time to waste."

Michael Alleyn gave me a long thoughtful look, saying nothing, but Earl shook his head. "Gabriel hits hard and he hits fast," he said. "Eric Alleyn is the same. And they're a full day ahead of us. What's going to happen if they make their move sooner than you expect, and you're trapped behind enemy lines?"

"What if they make their move, and Meritt gets killed behind enemy lines?"

Rain gave an exasperated sigh. "I hate to be the one to break it to you, but the world does not revolve around Meritt. Don't be so stubborn."

I gave her a scathing look, but I didn't argue. There was no point. They wouldn't listen. As for being stubborn—well, I wasn't Eric Alleyn's daughter for nothing. I knew what was right and what was wrong.

"We'll all go to the stockade," Earl said, in a tone of finality.

For a time we skimmed across the dark water in silence. Michael Alleyn gazed out across the waves, his face unreadable. Fiona stared fixedly at him, as if he might vanish at any moment. Rain watched Mal at the tiller, more or less surreptitiously, and Earl watched Rain with a mixture of resignation and amusement. Will Bright, bizarrely, was looking downright happy. Once or twice he actually broke out in a cheery whistle.

After awhile Fiona turned to me. "I wonder what the others will think when they see us?" she said.

Rain snorted. "They'll be mad at Mal."

He smiled without looking away from the horizon. The moon was dropping rapidly—soon we'd be in complete darkness, save for whatever starlight penetrated the spotty clouds. Could Mal navigate by starlight?

"Gabriel won't blame Mal," Earl said pointedly.

Rain threw him a cool look, but then seemed to think better of it. "Maybe you could explain," she said. "He listens to you. You could go in first, and explain that we came because we had to bring the watchmaker."

Michael Alleyn smiled faintly.

Earl leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, making the muscles in his arms bulge. "How many years have I been bodyguard for your family?" he said to Rain.

"All my life."

"And how many times in nineteen years have I interceded with Gabriel for you?"

Rain's face softened. "Only once a week or so."

"And how many times have I helped you directly disobey his wishes in a matter of life and death?"

Rain frowned. "This is the first time," she said. "But I'm not a child any longer. I'm old enough to decide what I want to risk, and when."

Earl nodded. "Agreed. That's why I let you come. I could have stopped you."

I expected Rain to deny it, but she merely nodded.

"All right," she said. "I get the point. If I'm old enough to risk my life, I'm old enough to tell my father."

I was still mad at Earl—and everyone else who had left us in the dark about the group slipping away in Mal's first boat—but I had to admit he was pretty decent. His wife had died a long time ago, and the Drewbloods were as close as he had to family. I guessed he was a sort of an honorary uncle.

Which reminded me of my uncle Rafe.

I listened to the waves slapping against the boat and thought about him, wishing I could tell him everything I'd learned in the few short days since his death. It seemed unfair that I knew about our family, about the other island, about the experiment, and he didn't. It seemed unfair that he had laid so much of the groundwork, and wouldn't get to see the end.

And what would he have thought of his brother and his parents? For a time I entertained myself with bittersweet imaginings, picturing a family gathering with Rafe sitting beside Gabriel at the table, our mother smiling and leaning down between them, setting out platters of food. Three Drewblood siblings, now lost to each other. Three siblings, and only one left to carry on the family memories and the family name.

Mal's sail, full of wind, pulled us speedily along beneath the setting moon. Sooner than I would have thought possible, the island where I'd grown up was rising in the distance.

"Is the island bigger on the other side?" Will said, studying the coastline.

"No," I said. "It's much smaller than your island, and it's almost a perfect circle."

I spent a few minutes describing the city's layout, the streets that stretched out from the watchtower like spokes from a wheel, the location of the Watcher compound.

"The stockade is somewhere north of the compound," I concluded. "Somewhere back in the woods."

Earl spoke. "Approximately how far is it from the north beach to the stockade?"

Carefully, I kept triumph out of my voice. "I don't know."

"*Approximately* means make your best guess," Rain said.

"I can't. I tried to tell you earlier, but nobody would listen. I've never been to the stockade."

Silence met that announcement. Then Rain flung out her hands. "So how will we find it?"

"Well, I have a sort of general idea of where it is," I said.

Will Bright gave me a look that said he knew I was enjoying this, but he didn't speak. Neither did Michael Alleyn.

"How general is general?" Fiona said. "How long do you think it will take to find it?"

"I don't know, since I don't know where it is. And we can't go in a straight line. The wilderland has a lot of big rocks and fallen trees we'll have to go around, and in some places the underbrush is so thick you can hardly walk. We'll have to keep an eye out for the wild men, of course. And Sir Tom sets booby traps. I don't know where all of them are."

Their faces turned toward the moon, which was falling fast toward the horizon; it would be completely gone by the time we reached land.

It took all my self-control, but I didn't say anything else. I'd given them enough to think about.

As we drew nearer, the tree line rose dark and threatening over the pale strip of sandy beach, and the moon vanished below the horizon.

Mal began to furl the sail. "We will paddle from here," he said.

"This is the beach where Sir Tom's cave is," I remarked, trying to sound casual. "That's where I stayed the first time I left the city. It's safe and has a bed and supplies."

Michael Alleyn eyed me speculatively.

"All right," Earl said, his tone telling me I wasn't getting away with anything. "We can go to this cave tonight, and then on to the stockade at daybreak. You're sure you can find this cave?"

"I think so. There's a giant tree near it—Jensen shot at us from there."

"Quiet now," Mal said, tying off the sail. "Sound carries over water."

We drifted nearer and nearer. Mal pulled on his shirt and began to paddle, and the swishing of the oars was soft, obscured by the shushing of the sea. We were almost perfectly silent, almost perfectly

invisible.

The night was very dark, even with the stars, but by peering hard into the darkness, I finally made out what I was sure was the giant tree. I touched Mal and pointed in its direction and he turned the nose of the boat toward it. We slipped closer and closer, and now I could hear the waves lapping on the shore. I could only guess how far the cave was from that tree, but surely even in the dark we could find Sir Tom's hiding place. His beach had been flat, tilting gently down to the water. So the cave had to be somewhere between the two steeper areas in front of us.

We ran aground a few feet from the shore and, climbing out, quietly pulled the boat beyond the tide line and into the shadows of a stand of trees. I didn't see the other boat; the men must have landed somewhere else, closer to the stockade. Surely they had—surely they weren't lost at sea.

Pushing that thought away, I helped the others unload our supplies—mostly food—and divide them up. Everyone was silent; Fiona looked nervous but determined.

I was glad that thanks to the heavy rain that morning we'd both put on pants, instead of Fiona's usual dresses. Even so, except for Earl we were an unlikely group of warriors—three girls, two old men, and the ever-strange Mal. At least Fiona had her gun, but all I had was a handcuff key and a bottle of Dream Drops, Ezzie's gifts to me. A lot of good those would do.

But brute strength wasn't all that mattered in this fight. We would be clever, and we would certainly be unexpected.

"Thank you," I murmured, leaning close to Mal.

"The directions were good ones," he replied, in an almost soundless voice. "And the wind was in our favor, and my boat handled very well. She is a good boat." With this burst of unusual chattiness—he must be very pleased to successfully have sailed all the way across the sea—he turned away. To check on Rain, I noticed.

I started off across the sand, looking for the large boulder that held the cave. Unfortunately, there were plenty of large boulders, all hugging the tree line where the cave would be, and we had to inspect each one or risk missing the crevice in the dark. This took time, moving through the soft shifting sand, and I was a little worried about Will Bright. He was probably about the same age as Michael, but he didn't look anywhere near as fit. The old watchmaker sure had fortunate genes.

I led, and Earl brought up the rear. The wind sighed and stirred my hair. The sea whispered. No one questioned me, but I began to wonder uneasily whether I'd been wrong. Had I picked the wrong tree as a landmark? Was the one Jensen had climbed somewhere further down the shoreline?

I had almost given up hope when Mal touched my hand. I looked in the direction of his gaze.

At first I saw nothing. Then it came again—the tiniest flicker of light, deep in a dark rocky cleft.

It was the cave, and someone was in it.