

THE DRY COUNTRY, CHAPTER ONE**JUDITH PRATT**

Miskin stood at the Gate.

Above her, the Wall stretched higher than two men standing. It wound to the west and east as far as Miskin could see. No one could get into the Dry Country unless they hiked many leagues to the end of the Wall. If anyone was stupid enough to go all the way around just to avoid paying a Guide, they deserved their fate—to be lost in the Dry forever.

Miskin had always wanted to cross the Dry Country, to see it change shape as she walked across it, to feel its strange visions. Now she'd saved enough coin to sign up for a journey with a Guide. Guides could find their way through the shifting landscape. Guides could lead travelers through the Dry to the endless possibilities of Mairewald, and the unimaginable ocean.

But Miskin didn't care about Maireport. She just wanted to see the strange hills and rocks of the Dry Country. And—she didn't let herself think about this much—she wanted to become a Guide. She went up close to the Wall and put her hands on the stone, shivering, not from the early autumn chill but from excitement. She tilted her head to look up at the top of the Wall, where stone became weathered wood.

Then she found herself looking for footholds in the stone, wanting to climb the Wall, to get into the Dry Country immediately. Stupid, she told herself. Always rushing into things. Carefully and deliberately, she turned around to see if any of the other travelers had arrived.

A shaft of sunlight shot over the mountains, briefly blinding her. Sunrise. Miskin took a deep breath. The travelers were to gather at sunrise. When they had all met for their schooling about the trip, she realized that most of the others came from the poor back streets of Yorlith, or from the rocky hill farms that could barely support a goat. What would they think of a girl who grew up in the lush Kayetan valley? A girl who ran away from two fine offers of marriage?