

Prologue

THE OLD WOMAN WATCHED BECKY settle into the seat beside her. She'd been sitting alone under the deep porch in her favorite rocking chair since before dawn, enjoying the approaching storm and waiting for the girl to wake up. It had been raining off and on since around midnight, but the lightning and strong winds had begun just a half hour before. The woman felt it when the thunder awakened her granddaughter. Becky was uneasy about the storm's violence and flinched every time a network of lightning streaked across the sky. She'd count the seconds in her head between the lightning and the thunder to see if the storm was getting closer.

"I'm glad you could come this week. You're probably wondering why your mother sent you to stay with me." The young girl nodded, looking mostly at her grandmother, but also casting an occasional furtive glance toward the clouds. "Well, I thought it was time you and I got to know one another a little better. We see each other during holidays, but it can be a little distracting when everybody's talking all at once."

Becky stared at the ground for a moment, and pushed herself up higher in the seat.

"But aren't you pretty busy?" the girl asked. "I mean, you're kind of important."

The old woman smiled, but didn't answer directly.

"It probably feels strange not to be in school, doesn't it?" Becky nodded. "A lot of things are important, especially time with family. Don't you think?" Again, the girl nodded, but didn't say anything; a

small frown made its way to her face. "I think you'll see that this time we have together is important, too . . . for both of us." Thunder cracked suddenly, surprising Becky. She looked even more uncomfortable now that the storm's heart was almost on top of them.

"I love the rain," the old woman said, almost to herself. "It makes everything smell so nice."

"I guess so," the girl said, her frown deepening. "But that's mostly when it stops." The old woman laughed and reached across the space between them. Her deeply veined hand closed briefly over the girl's arm.

"You're right, of course. But did you know that the water we see falling has been doing a kind of dance for millions, even billions of years?" The girl shook her head. "It's made this . . . this incredible journey time and again. See that drop?" The woman pointed to a ripple just formed in a puddle near the bottom of the steps. "It might have been part of a glacier in the Western Mountains just a hundred years ago.

"Glaciers are constantly changing. They advance and retreat with the seasons, and move slowly all the time, like the thickest toffee. When the ice melts, water trickles down their slopes, collecting and forming into pools and streams. These join with other streams, until they become rivers that flow across the Land and on to the sea.

"That drop we saw was certainly part of an ocean at one time—who knows for how long. Eventually it evaporated under the sun's warmth, becoming part of a cloud that drifted through the sky—it may even have gone all the way around the world. Later, cool air caused it to condense into the drop we saw, and today it fell to give us something interesting to talk about.

"Everything and everyone we see is connected in one way or another—and they're all constantly changing, too. It's amazing when you think about it. That such a small thing—a drop of water—can go through so many changes, be part of so many different things, so many times. And yet somehow, it always manages to come back as a drop of water." Becky's frown faded while she listened. "A lot of people think *we* go through something like this, too—they say we

return repeatedly as one person or another. I don't know if that's true, but it's interesting to think about while you watch the rain fall."

The woman knew that the girl was more relaxed now, and no longer paying attention to the flashes in the sky.

"You probably know something about my life, and at least a few of the things that happened to me." The abrupt shift in subject startled Becky. She could see the surprise in her eyes.

"Yeah." Becky looked down, and her voice was almost a whisper.

"One reason you're here this week is so that I can share something with you. It'll be just the two of us."

"Will it hurt?" Becky asked unexpectedly. The old woman tried hard not to laugh, but a tiny smile escaped her control anyway. "Because I've heard some of the stories about you," the girl clarified.

"No," the woman said, trying to put as much reassurance into her voice as possible. "Not at all. There'll probably be times when you'll feel afraid, and there'll be things that you'll find confusing—you may not understand them right away. But your mother and I waited until we both thought you were old enough for this." The woman touched the girl's mind with a thought, and then paused before asking the next question. She wanted to give her time to absorb everything.

"Is that all right with you—do you want to go on?" she asked. It was important to her that Becky be given the choice, but the old woman also knew that the girl's time was running out. Before long things would begin to happen to her—terrifying things that no one should have to face alone.

Becky thought a little longer. "Okay." And then she asked, "What will it be like?"

The old woman took a deep breath, and let it out as a long sigh. "Like a dream, one that will seem very, very real. But you should know that I'll be with you all the time."

Becky swallowed, and then stared directly into the old woman's gray eyes for several seconds.

"Okay, I'm ready."

CHAPTER 1

Is This Real?

PHOEBE STUMBLED AND FELL. HER hands were already bleeding from before, but now they had all new stones and dirt embedded into them. She lay on the ground coughing, trying to decide whether to get up, or just give up. But then something flared in her chest—a toughness, or maybe just plain stubbornness. She gathered herself together and pushed forward. One quick look over her shoulder was all she could spare. It wasn't possible to see who was chasing her, but what she did see made her gasp—the sky was burning.

Thick clouds hung over the valley where she lived, and beyond the surrounding mountains. Dark columns of smoke rose up to meet this dense canopy, like giant pillars, and at the base of each one was an enormous fire. Light from the flames was reflected in the clouds, painting everything in a dim red cast.

Phoebe's legs ached from climbing, every step hurt more than the one before—she prayed her legs wouldn't cramp up and make her fall again.

Need to stop, she thought, coughing, just for a minute.

She'd been climbing a long time, but still didn't know exactly where she was. The trail zigged and zagged its way up the mountain, following the hill's contours. It was hard to spot anything through the smoke, let alone a clear landmark, or to even see where the city was.

A horrible smell filled the air—the odor of rotting fish. Millions of them had been washing up on the shores of the harbor for weeks,

and the east wind carried the odor inland. But without the breeze, her eyes would have been burning from all the smoke, and it would have been hard to breathe.

How did I know that—about the fish? Phoebe wondered. She felt dizzy, and it was so hard to think clearly. *Where am I? Why the hell are those people chasing me? Is this real?* Phoebe wasn't sure it was happening at all. The last thing she remembered was going to bed, but that hadn't always meant she was just dreaming. Lots of horrible things happened to her while she slept, but never anything quite like this.

This has got to be someone's dream! she thought. *But it doesn't make sense. It's too real—even the people.*

Anger poured out from the mob of people behind her, fear and hatred—all directed at her. The men and women in dreams she shared had never been like this before, with emotions so strong that they caused her pain. Dream people usually lacked presence, and they didn't have thoughts. These people were real. But there was no time to stop and think about why she was here—it was run, or die.

For now, Phoebe concentrated on the path, and on each step. The trail was barely visible in the darkness. The only illumination came from the firelight reflected in the clouds. The path was badly damaged, its edge crumbled, and sometimes half of the trail was missing altogether. One wrong step could mean a very long fall.

Rocks in the soil helped to hold the soil together, but they were a problem, too. Wherever the dirt had washed away, these same rocks became dangerous trip hazards. She overlooked one, her foot caught on it, and she fell face-first into the ground. The salty, metallic taste in her mouth triggered a memory of the bright copper pennies her father used to give her for ice cream on Saturdays. Phoebe swore out loud and got back up, confused, but angry, too.

Why is this happening? she wondered, stumbling forward again.

As if to answer her question, familiar images and sensations—like a lost memory—flooded into her mind. Everything around her changed all at once. Time on the trail slowed to a crawl as her mind raced ahead—whole minutes were experienced in the moment between two footsteps.



Now Phoebe was standing on a hill, just under one of the torches that ringed a little hollow, and she was looking down into a crowd. Hundreds of people had gathered and were kneeling around a hooded man. He stood inside a small circle of torches speaking passionately, his arms spread out wide, gesturing as he spoke. Other figures, also wearing robes but with bare heads, moved among the kneeling people. Each carried a torch in one hand and what looked like a coil of rope in the other. The kneeling people were dressed in ordinary street clothes, but many had dark streaks on their backs.

The speaker's face was hidden in the shadow of the hood. His head turned side to side as he looked around, slowly rotating to face different parts of the crowd, but then the man abruptly stopped to stare in Phoebe's direction. He pointed a finger at her, issuing some sort of command. Everyone turned to look at her and, after a shocked pause, picked up his words, repeating them. Phoebe could feel the fear spreading through the crowd. A few individuals sprang to their feet and rushed toward her, the rest followed more slowly. Everyone was yelling the same words over and over. After a moment, she understood what they were saying: "Kill the demon!"

The memory ended as suddenly as it had begun and she was back on the hill, climbing again.



What was that? she thought. The abrupt shift in time made her stumble and almost fall again. She paused for a moment to get her bearings, and finally saw two landmarks that she recognized: a glint of steel high above her in one direction, and the muted glow of the town in another. She knew where she was now, and the trail took on an all-too-familiar look. She'd climbed here with her father years before. The town's shape was more obvious when she zigged west at the next turn—it was across the harbor. She couldn't escape this way—the trail was a dead end!

She was heading east along a peninsula—the rocky appendage of a mountain to the north of town. This trail ended at the top of tall cliffs overlooking the sea. *Crap*, she thought, almost ready to cry. But the others were getting close, and she had to go on.

After a while, the path ended and the ground opened onto a broad shelf facing the east. A sharp line of rock was at her feet and nothing but a vast emptiness beyond it. She could hear waves breaking on the rocks far below, but it was too dark to see much detail.

Individual voices were beginning to emerge from behind now—they'd reach her soon. She looked west and saw the torches they carried, a line of fire snaking its way up the hill toward her. Ominously, the sound of several hundred feet pounding on the earth was getting louder, too.

"Crap!" Phoebe breathed again.

All at once, a new sensation ignited from deep inside of her. It started as an icy chill in her stomach and then changed, tearing across her chest and to her arms and legs and fingertips. A blistering heat and unearthly cold passed through her all at the same time—intense, and getting stronger.

"What's happening to me?" she yelled.

The pain seemed to double every second and she fell to her knees screaming in agony. The mob was forgotten, the smoke and the fires and the smell of rotten fish all faded away. But the pain kept on building higher and higher until Phoebe was sure she'd pass out. Then everything changed again. A strong presence touched her from inside—a woman. It felt as though warm arms were holding her, and helping to keep her mind and body together. Finally, the burning dissipated, slowly at first, but soon she was free of the pain.

What the hell was that? she thought, weaker than before. She managed to climb back to her feet, and almost fell over the lip of rock before catching herself. But now her executioners were arriving.

The hooded man was in the lead, just cresting that last rise. He'd have her in a second or two. Desperate, her mind raced ahead, evaluating and choosing in an instant. And as his hand reached toward her, she leaned out over the cliff and jumped.

Phoebe looked up as she fell, her arms flailing. She stared back into the shadow of the hood where the man's eyes *must* be. Just then, a woman's voice spoke into her mind.

I love you, Phoebe.