

THE SHARDS OF EXCALIBUR

4

# CAVE BENEATH *the* SEA

EDWARD WILLETT

"Willett brings great energy, clarity, and excitement  
to every page." – Robert J. Sawyer

## CHAPTER ONE



# SNOW DAY

ARIANE FORSYTHE STARED OUT the farmhouse's second-storey window at the swirling snow, and sighed. *Just my luck*, she thought. *Lady of the Lake, in freaking Saskatchewan – where lakes are frozen solid six months out of the year.*

Downstairs the radio was playing “It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas,” and Aunt Phyllis was singing along, more or less in key. *Christmas*, she thought. *Christmas in two weeks, and I still don’t have a clue where the fourth shard of Excalibur is.*

It wasn’t supposed to have worked out like this. When she had first transported Aunt Phyllis and her aunt’s old friend Emma Macphail to the Barringer Historic Farm Bed and Breakfast (and as she’d suggested to Wally, they’d both proved to be remarkably composed about being dissolved into water and whisked across the province in incorporeal form), she’d thought she’d be certain to sense the location of the fourth shard within a day or two. She’d expected to transport herself there easily, grab it, and return, and then go on to find the fifth and final piece, the hilt, within another week or so. With that much of the sword she could

apparently (at least she'd been told she'd be able to) force Merlin – now living in the modern world as cybernetics billionaire Rex Major – to give up the piece he had, and that would have been that. Door to Faerie closed, Rex Major reduced to an ordinary man, no more magic, no more Lady of the Lake, back to school, back to her poor cat Pendragon, now living with the lady next door in Regina, back to the ordinary concerns of ordinary fifteen-year-old girls.

Such as finding her mother. With Rex Major no longer a threat, with the power of the Lady vanished from the world, there'd be no reason for her mother to keep running and hiding – if that was what she was doing. Their only lead was a photo from a convenience store in Carlyle. There was no reason to think her mom was still anywhere near that town, or even in Saskatchewan, but at least it was a place to start.

But she'd sensed nothing. The “few days” at Barringer Farm had stretched to two weeks, then three. And now to six.

On December 2 they'd celebrated Wally's fifteenth birthday. “Now we're the same age!” he'd said gleefully to Ariane.

“Only until March 12,” she said. “Then I'll be sweet sixteen and you'll still be a runty fifteen-year-old.”

He'd stuck out his tongue at her.

Two more weeks had gone by. Now Christmas was coming, the goose was getting fat, and here in a farmhouse Ariane sat.

Sam and Nancy Barringer, the proprietors of the B&B, had greeted Aunt Phyllis like a long-lost cousin. Apparently they'd hit it off big-time during her previous stay at the farm – so much so that, after a week, Sam and Nancy and Phyllis and Emma had somehow decided that Phyllis and Emma would housesit while Sam and Nancy went off to spend an indeterminate number of wintry weeks with

their daughter in New Mexico, something they'd always wanted to do but had never been able to take time for.

It had all worked out perfectly. Phyllis and Emma and Ariane and Wally, tucked away in a rustic farmhouse on the northern slopes of the Cypress Hills, their only link to the outside world a land-line telephone, were as hidden from Rex Major's Internet-surfing magic as they could possibly be. Wonderful.

Except for the little fact that Ariane didn't have a clue what to do next.

She looked down from the swirling snow to the sheet of paper in front of her. Aunt Phyllis had formally withdrawn her from Oscana Collegiate in Regina, but that didn't mean she was off the books-hook. It turned out Aunt Phyllis's old friend Emma was a retired schoolteacher. It had also turned out that the "interesting books" Aunt Phyllis had mentioned seeing in the parlour during her previous visit to Barringer Farm included a number of schoolbooks and classics of English literature. Which was why Ariane was now trying to write an essay about Agnes Macphail, the first woman elected to Canada's Parliament and apparently a distant relation of Emma's. She'd gotten as far as "Agnes Macphail began her career as a country schoolteacher." She'd written that twenty minutes ago.

She sighed and put down the pen, then shoved her chair back from the desk, stood up, and stretched. It was almost time to fetch Wally.

Doing schoolwork without Internet access was a struggle for Ariane, but Wally clearly felt as if he'd had a part of himself amputated. Not only that, their only hope for tracking down Ariane's mother was to troll the Web for traces. There was no doubt that was what Rex Major would be doing. Of course, as one of the richest men in the world, he could also hire an army of private investigators, and possibly had.

There was another problem, too. Major had talked Wally's parents – well, magically Commanded them, actually – into letting Wally withdraw from school and live with him, but that arrangement had been permanently shattered when Wally had fled Major's Toronto penthouse (clobbering a security guard with a poker in the process), gotten himself to Prince Albert, rescued Aunt Phyllis, stolen a sizeable amount of money from Major, flown to New Zealand on his own, and actually found and retrieved the third shard of Excalibur before either Ariane or Merlin had gotten their hands on it.

Major's response had been to turn his attention to Wally's sister Felicia, a.k.a. "Flish." Being of the same family, she shared Wally's mystical connection to their distant ancestor, the one and only King Arthur, and thus would apparently serve Major's nefarious purposes just as well. With Felicia now occupying Wally's former place in the lap of penthouse luxury on the north shore of Lake Ontario, Major had had no reason to continue to Command Wally's parents to, basically, forget about their son. Instead, he'd told them that Wally had run away in Toronto.

Ordinarily, a single runaway wouldn't have made the news, but once police traced Wally first to Prince Albert, then to Saskatoon, and then to New Zealand, his disappearance had become a national story – especially when they uncovered the fact that he'd never used his return ticket, and the last person to see him had been the taxi driver who had taken him to the base of the hiking trail leading to Lake Putahi, where the third shard of Excalibur lay hidden on an island.

A massive search-and-rescue effort had been launched in New Zealand, not surprisingly to no avail, since Wally was safe in Saskatchewan the whole time. The story had finally died away a month ago, with the working theory being that Wally had gotten lost in the mountains of New

Zealand and met an unfortunate fate. But since that hadn't been confirmed, Wally's photo was in police missing-persons databases all over Canada.

Oddly enough, Rex Major's name had never surfaced in the media as the person Wally had run away *from*. *The Voice of Command at work*, Ariane thought. It was peculiar that both Wally and Flish were immune to Major's power to Command, although their father, Jim, wasn't. Ariane and Wally had discussed it and decided it must be the work of the sword. A semi-sentient magical entity, it had apparently decided that it would be in its own interest for the two latest-generation descendants of King Arthur to be protected from outside influences – except, of course, from the influence wielded by Excalibur itself.

Ariane's and Wally's problem had been to find a way to get Wally Internet access without Rex Major detecting him, or, if he did spot Wally, without being able to find him. Wally had pointed out the best way to do that was to access the Web from multiple, widely separated, randomly chosen locations. But Wally obviously couldn't fly commercially without getting caught in either Merlin's magical-software net or by the standard screening procedures, so all travel arrangements had to be courtesy of the Ariane Travel Agency: "The Lady of the Lake, for when you absolutely, positively, have to arrive at your destination soaking wet," Wally had quipped.

Which was why Wally was currently in Gravenhurst, Ontario, "Gateway to Muskoka," using a public computer in the local library, digging through online newspapers, police reports, photos, and everything else he could think of, looking for some trace of Emily Forsythe, Ariane's mother.

But the afternoon was getting on (and of course it was already an hour later in Gravenhurst), and the only way Wally could get home was for Ariane to go get him, so it was time to get moving.

She took another look at the snow falling outside, thickening by the minute. She felt a sudden pang of worry. The farmhouse might be safe, but it was also a prison. The farmhouse water came from a well, and the aquifer it drew from didn't extend far enough for her to use it as a pathway to anywhere else. She could travel through the clouds, but not in heavy snow. She could wield frozen water as a weapon, but couldn't travel through it. So the falling snow acted as a barrier, keeping her grounded.

She could get to Wally from Maple Creek, thirty kilometres away, courtesy of any tap in any bathroom or kitchen. But she couldn't bring him back there. She could only materialize them in a body of water deep enough to submerge them, and while Maple Creek had a swimming pool, it was an outdoor pool, snow-drifted and forlorn this time of year. Elkwater, the other relatively nearby settlement, had a resort hotel with a pool; but it was a salt-water pool, useless to Ariane.

That meant the only place they could reliably return to after each of Wally's jaunts in search of Internet access was Medicine Hat, more than an hour's drive from Baringer Farm in good weather. And the way this storm was shaping up...

Ariane grabbed the backpack she always kept handy, the one that held her bathing suit, a towel, a change of clothes, a waterproof flashlight and a knife. She already wore the first shard of Excalibur strapped to her side beneath a tensor bandage: she only took it off when she was showering or sleeping. She grabbed her coat from the foot of the big four-poster bed and hurried out into the upstairs hall. Six rooms opened onto it, and a central staircase led down from a well in the middle. The whole house glowed with polished wood and antique glass and brass. It was like living in a Lucy Maud Montgomery novel.

She thumped down the stairs. The radio had moved on to “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree,” but Aunt Phyllis wasn’t singing. Instead she stood in the big kitchen, with its oak cabinetry and black-and-white-tiled floor, one hand pulling back the chintz curtains that hung over the white enamel sink, peering out into the yard. She turned to Ariane, worry plain on her face. “Oh, dear,” she said. “I didn’t realize it had gotten so bad.”

“We’d better go,” Ariane said. “Before it gets worse.”

“Emma had best drive you,” Aunt Phyllis said. “You know I don’t like driving in snow. She grew up on a farm and learned to drive when she was thirteen.”

Ariane blinked at that. Emma Macphail had surprised her pretty much every day since she’d met her. “Okay,” she said. “Where is she?”

“Here,” Emma said, coming into the kitchen from the dining room. Tall, thin, and gaunt, with a shock of unruly white hair, she cut a striking figure. Ariane doubted she’d ever had the slightest problem with classroom discipline when she’d been teaching full time: she must have been terrifying.

Emma already had her coat on and held her gloves in her left hand, the keys to the Barringers’ ten-year-old Ford Explorer in the other. “I’m sorry, Ariane, I was engrossed in my book and wasn’t watching the weather. You’re quite right, we should hurry.” She smiled at Aunt Phyllis. “If worst comes to worst, we’ll just stay at the hotel tonight. I’ll call.”

Ariane zipped up her coat and jammed a tuque on her head. She pulled open the kitchen door and stepped into the small back porch, where she extracted her boots from the pile by the door, then sat down on the wooden bench that spanned one wall of the porch to tug them on. Emma sat beside her to pull on her own practical zip-up boots. Then she opened the back door.

An icy blast of freezing air and wind-blown snow instantly dropped the porch temperature twenty degrees. “Can we get through this?” Ariane said uneasily.

“Can’t tell from here,” Emma said. “There’s not much snow on the ground yet, so hopefully the drifts aren’t too bad. Come on.” She led the way out into the storm.

The Barringer Historic Farm Bed and Breakfast stood atop a hill, with a long drive leading up to it past the barn. Sam and Nancy had long since stopped farming the land themselves, instead renting it out to Jimmy Ferguson, the next-door neighbour who also looked after the snowplowing and shovelling and general upkeep. The barn doubled as the garage, but the Explorer had been left out that morning in anticipation of this afternoon’s trip to Medicine Hat. A thick white blanket covered it, thicker on the lee side, where the wind hadn’t blown it away.

Emma and Ariane trudged through the snow to the vehicle. Ariane grabbed the snowbrush and began clearing the Explorer’s windows while Emma cranked the engine. It started without difficulty – despite the snow, it wasn’t particularly cold, around minus-ten degrees Celsius or so – and Ariane climbed inside. “Good day for four-wheel drive,” Emma said cheerfully as she backed up and turned so they were pointing down the long winding road that led to the grid road that led to Saskatchewan 724, which turned into Alberta 515, which led to the Buffalo Trail, which led to the TransCanada Highway, which led to Medicine Hat. The trip took an hour in good weather.

This wasn’t good weather.

Still, it was early in the winter and, as Emma had noted, there hadn’t been a lot of snow yet. As Ariane had hoped, the roads weren’t drifting closed, at least not yet, and although she could see only a couple of hundred metres ahead, the road was still mostly brown and not white, so Emma was unlikely to drive into the ditch. And they still

had a couple of hours of daylight. But coming back...

“I think we probably *will* need to stay the night in Medicine Hat,” Emma said, echoing Ariane’s unspoken concern. “If it’s still storming we won’t want to try to drive back in the dark.”

“That means a computer check-in,” Ariane said uneasily.

“In my name,” Emma said. “It shouldn’t raise any red flags. Rex Major hasn’t connected me to you lot.”

*That we know of*, Ariane thought. But there was no point in telling Emma that; she knew it as well as Ariane. Besides, risks were everywhere. Driving into the ditch and possibly freezing to death by the side of the road in the middle of nowhere was probably a greater one than the possibility that Major would connect a random check-in at the Medicine Hat Lodge to his young adversaries.

Probably.

They turned north onto the Buffalo Trail about an hour after leaving the farm. Visibility improved a bit, and they made better time driving north to the TransCanada. Once they were on the four-lane, the storm seemed barely a nuisance. But they’d lost a lot of time nonetheless, and Ariane was uneasily aware that the appointed hour when she was supposed to retrieve Wally from Gravenhurst – 6 p.m., his time – had come and gone, and was receding further into the past with every second.

Ariane and Wally had the challenging process of traveling by swimming pool down to a science. Every time Wally went on one of his research trips, they would drive into Medicine Hat (after calling the Lodge first to make sure that there was public swimming that day – sometimes, when the hotel was full, drop-in swimming wasn’t available). They went into their respective change rooms and put on swimsuits, leaving their clothes in the locker. (Ariane had made a point of buying a new one-piece to replace

the bikini she'd stolen from Flish's wardrobe. It hadn't covered nearly as much of her as she liked to have covered.)

They didn't actually vanish from the pool itself; they didn't need to. Instead they just waited until one of the bathrooms was empty and no one was watching, and slipped in together. Ariane turned on the tap, and away they went.

She'd become much better at navigating: she could pick a town on the map and find her way unerringly to it, through senses she couldn't describe, even to herself, especially since those abilities only existed when she was in the magical watery form the powers she'd inherited from the Lady of the Lake permitted her to take. When she materialized again, everything she had done in that immaterial state seemed almost dream-like.

They'd chosen Gravenhurst for this latest trip because, like the other towns Wally had travelled to in order to access the Internet, it had an indoor pool. In the case of Gravenhurst, the pool belonged to the YMCA, and offered recreational adult swimming in the morning. (They'd researched it at the Maple Creek library: they weren't worried – much – about Rex Major connecting a search for swimming pools to the pair of them.)

She'd taken Wally to Gravenhurst early that morning, the two of them materializing in the YMCA pool and swimming up from the bottom of the deep end, startling two elderly ladies gently exercising in the shallow portion. "Where'd you two come from?" one had said, laughing. "You startled us!"

"And why are you carrying a backpack in the pool?" the other had asked Wally.

"Long story," Wally had said cheerfully.

"Sorry for startling you," Ariane added. "Come on, Wally."

She'd given up worrying about explaining anything to

anyone when they were seen arriving in a new location. People would make up their own explanations, none of which, she was pretty sure, would involve the Lady of the Lake, Excalibur, or magical powers.

They'd walked, dripping, out of sight, Ariane had ordered them both dry, and then Wally had trotted off to the change room while Ariane had gone into a washroom, turned on the tap, and headed back to Medicine Hat.

Sometimes Ariane just waited in Medicine Hat until it was time to retrieve Wally, but that morning Ariane had asked Emma to take her back to the farm so she could work on her homework. Considering she'd only managed one sentence of her essay, that had clearly been a waste of time. Ariane stared out the window at the snowy landscape. *And now we're late.*

Emma turned off of the TransCanada at the first exit into Medicine Hat. The Medicine Hat Lodge, a four-storey building of brown brick, stood close by the highway, and two minutes later they pulled to a stop in its parking lot.

The snow had thickened in just the last few minutes of the drive. Emma sighed as she turned off the engine. "Looks like we're definitely spending the night," she said. "I'll book a couple of rooms – one for you and me and one for Wally."

Ariane nodded. She hurried into the lobby, filled with the fading light of the snowy day outside through the big slanting atrium windows overhead. Emma followed at a more sedate space. "You check in, Aunt Emma," she said loudly for the benefit of the desk clerk. "I'm going swimming!"

She heard the clerk, a young First Nations woman, laugh. "She's excited," she said.

"She loves the water," Emma said.

"So do I," the clerk said.

*Not like I do,* Ariane thought.

The pool area featured a leisure pool and a four-storey dual waterslide. It was quiet that evening. The worst thing from Ariane's point of view was that the waterpark filled an interior courtyard, so that hotel room windows stared down at it from all directions. But who really noticed an extra kid or two in a pool? She and Wally always materialized at the bottom of the waterslide, and her powers, more finely tuned all the time, allowed her to delay until the area was empty. Who would note that the two youngsters climbing out had never actually gone down the slide?

Into the change room, out of her clothes, into her swimsuit, leaving the shard of Excalibur in its place, snug against her side. She put on the backpack and went over to the change-room sinks: no need to go into the pool to *start* her trip. She turned on the water. Just before she touched it, she checked the time on the wall clock.

Seven o'clock. Eight o'clock in Ontario. She was two hours late.

*Sorry, Wally,* she thought uneasily, then let the water take her away.