

CHAPTER ONE



FAIRY ISLAND

ARIANE AWOKE TO THE *putt-putt-putt* of an outboard motor.

Jerked out of a dream she couldn't quite remember – there had been mountains, water, and of course Excalibur, which was *always* in her dreams – she blinked up at the underside of the bunk over her head for a moment before memory kicked in and she rolled over in her sleeping bag, all at once, and peered out through the tiny opening in the curtains that was all she dared allow herself.

It was the same old-fashioned aluminum boat she'd seen three times the day before. In the pre-dawn twilight, it was nosing along the shore of the mainland, just a couple of hundred metres across the waters of Emma Lake. A man sat in the stern, hand on the throttle, intently studying the nearest cabin on that side of the water: Aunt Phyllis's cabin.

Ariane had decided not to rejoin Aunt Phyllis, but she hadn't gone far. Worn out from the journey across the Atlantic, hurting and angry from Wally's betrayal – he'd chosen to join forces with Merlin and give the ancient sorcerer the shard of Excalibur Ariane had retrieved from the cave in France – she'd slipped into the water of Emma

Lake but travelled no farther than the eerily appropriately named Fairy Island, where a summer cabin stood directly opposite Aunt Phyllis's, locked and shuttered for the season. She'd broken in by fashioning a spear of ice to smash the lock. She'd eaten cold canned chili and corn chips, drunk bottled water, stripped off her dirty clothes, and wrapped herself in one of the sleeping bags rolled up in the bunk beds in a tiny bedroom off the combined kitchen/living room that took up most of the space. She'd spent the whole next day in the chilly cabin, much of it staring at the phone, wondering if she should call her aunt.

That had been three days ago. In the ensuing time she'd eaten just about everything left in the cabin. She'd found a stack of books, every single one of them by Danielle Steel, and had read two that were bestsellers (though she couldn't see why), ten years before she was born. She'd napped. She'd waited, and waited, and *waited*, hoping the third shard of Excalibur would make its presence known.

It hadn't. And she still hadn't made up her mind whether or not to phone Aunt Phyllis.

She'd watched her mother's sister leave the cabin every day, walking away down the road on the other side and coming back an hour later. Her "morning constitutional," her aunt called it. At night she'd seen her through the cabin windows, eating a lonely supper, reading. Once or twice she'd seen her use the telephone. *Trying to find out what happened to me?* Ariane wondered. She felt guilty. But she still didn't call.

And then yesterday morning the boat with its tiny outboard motor had chugged past for the first time. A few hours later it had chugged past again. And once more, just at twilight. It had disappeared down the lake to the east, where most of the cabins were, as night had closed in, but here it was back again. And the man in it didn't *only* watch Aunt Phyllis's cabin. Part of the time he focused his

attention on the cabin where Ariane hid.

It was the sole structure remaining on Fairy Island, except for the historic cabin of the artist Ernest Lindner at the northwest tip, and dated to the same era: the 1930s. Ariane had often wondered how it had survived. Certainly, no new construction was allowed on the island, which she'd always understood was a wildlife refuge. But through whatever quirk of history, here it was, and here she was, with a view of Aunt Phyllis's cabin – and the boatman with an unusual interest in it.

He has to be one of Rex Major's people, Ariane thought. Keeping an eye on Aunt Phyllis. But is he really interested in her, or is he waiting for me to show up?

She rolled away from the window and lay staring up at the top bunk, feeling almost physically ill. Four days since returning from France, and she still hadn't decided what to do.

She'd thought, when she'd first decided not to return to Aunt Phyllis, that she would simply rest for a few hours until her strength returned, then sense the location of the third shard and go to retrieve it. But though she'd done nothing but rest since then, still she sensed nothing. And she didn't even know enough about the magic to know what that absence of the third shard's song meant. Was the shard hidden away from water? Was it on the other side of the planet? Had it been destroyed?

She didn't think the latter was likely. The sword wasn't an ordinary sword, and she doubted it could be destroyed like an ordinary piece of steel: melted down and made into rivets or whatever. But the first two shards had both been hidden in water, or very close to it. If a shard had been moved away from water...would she still sense it? Her power – the power of the Lady of the Lake – was so intimately bound up with water she wasn't at all certain.

Or was something else going on?

She remembered her flight across the Atlantic, how she had reached for the power of the first shard – then strapped to her belly, now lying under her pillow – and failed to find it. Could the fact Merlin had the second shard – *the one Wally gave him*, she thought bitterly – be interfering with her ability to sense the third?

And if so, what could she do about it?

She didn't know. Didn't have a clue. And didn't have anyone she could talk to. Aunt Phyllis wouldn't be able to advise her, and if Ariane contacted her she might very well be putting her aunt in danger. Wally had abandoned her. The Lady of the Lake – who had shown up, uninvited, in Wascana Lake in Regina to proclaim Ariane her heir and give her some of the Lady's power so she could take up the quest to find the shards of Excalibur – had been banished from Earth by Merlin before she was quite done talking. Apparently the door from Earth to Faerie was not completely blocked, or all magic would have vanished: but Ariane did not know how to access it, or how to reach through it to the Lady.

And here I am on Fairy Island, she thought. *You'd think it would be some help.*

She got up, but didn't get dressed – she couldn't bear to put on her filthy clothes unless she had to. Instead she unzipped the sleeping bag completely and then draped it around herself like a thick cloak. She went into the kitchen and opened the cupboard. There was nothing left in there now but a box of salt, a few cans of tuna fish, and a big package of stale tortilla chips. She'd drunk the last of the bottled water the owners had left behind the day before.

She opened one of the cans of tuna, spread its contents on half a dozen of the tortilla chips, ate, licked her fingers, and then, with a sigh, set about getting dressed. She needed to go to the toilet, and that meant going outside, slipping along the path behind the cabin to the outhouse

fifteen metres away among the trees. Before she risked it, she took a careful look through all the windows for any signs of life on the lake. The cabin would hide her from anyone across the channel, including Aunt Phyllis, but not from anyone in a boat in the right place. The coast seemed clear, so she slipped out, did what she needed to do, and then opened the outhouse door...only to hear the *putt-putt* of the outboard motor again.

And this time, it was nosing along *her* shore.

She pulled the outhouse door almost closed and listened. *Go on by*, she thought. *Go on by, go on by...*

But instead, the motor changed tone, then stopped. She heard footsteps on wooden planks. The man had landed on the little floating dock. He was coming up to the cabin.

And she'd left the door open.

Does he know I'm here? she thought. *Is he planning to grab me and take me back to Rex Major?*

Not while I have a whole lake to draw on, he won't.

Then she had an even greater shock: she heard two voices, a man *and* a woman. She pushed the door to the outhouse open just a little farther, mostly so she could hear better, but also so she could get a breath of fresher air, and heard, "...built in 1933...only building on the island except for the Ernest Lindner cabin...wildlife refuge...grandfathered...has to be torn down once the current owner dies..." The woman seemed to be giving the man a tour of the place. Then her voice changed. "Someone's broken in!"

Ariane swore to herself.

The voices vanished. She guessed they were inside. She thought about making a break for it, running for the water. She could plunge into it and disappear before they could do anything.

But she didn't dare. If the man really was one of Rex Major's minions, he would immediately realize who she

was. And tell Major she had successfully made it back from France. Right now Major had to be wondering if she had simply vanished over the Atlantic. As long as she wasn't spotted, he would *keep* wondering. The minute he knew she was back in Canada, he might grab Aunt Phyllis as a hostage.

And then her heart leaped to her throat. There was another very good reason she couldn't simply flee into the water: *she had left the first shard of Excalibur underneath the pillow of the bottom bunk bed.* All it would take was for Major's man to lift that pillow, trying to figure out who had spent the night in the cabin...

Pulse pounding in her ears, she stood in the outhouse, and waited.

The back door she had come out of just minutes earlier opened. She let the outhouse door close almost all the way.

"No one here now," the man was saying. "Looks like they just spent the night and then took off. A tramp, maybe?"

"Maybe," the woman said. "Although a tramp with a boat is kind of odd. And we don't get a lot of homeless people up here." Her voice brightened. "Well, a bit of a mystery, but never mind that. What do you think of the place?"

"It should do me fine," the man said. "It has just the view I was looking for."

"Really?" the woman said. She sounded doubtful. "You can't see much but the cabins on the lakeshore over there."

"Not the cabin," the man said smoothly. "The island. I'm an artist. Planning to paint all winter."

"Well, this is certainly the place for that," the woman said. "Emma Lake is quite famous among Canadian artists. But you know that. That's why you're here."

"Absolutely," the man said. Even if she hadn't known he was lying, Ariane would have known he was lying,

just from the way he said it. But the real estate lady – as she presumed the woman to be – either didn't notice or didn't care.

“Well, then,” she said. “If you'll take me back across, we'll go into town and sign the papers.”

“Just a minute,” the man said, and to Ariane's horror, she heard footsteps on the wooden steps of the back porch, and then on the path leading to the outhouse. *Just my luck*, she thought, *he has to pee*. She readied herself for a frantic dash into the cottage. She'd have to grab the shard and then somehow get to the lake...

But the steps didn't come as far as the outhouse. They stopped. She held her breath, for more reasons than one, and waited. And waited. Just when she thought she'd have to breathe or pass out, the steps resumed...and went away from her. “All right,” the man said. “Let's head back. It's perfect.”

The voices faded around to the other side of the cabin. Ariane opened the door and looked out. Footsteps on the dock...and then the *putt-putt-putt* of the outboard.

“Going back to town” probably meant going all the way to Prince Albert, almost fifty kilometres away. The man would be gone for at least a couple of hours.

Ariane didn't mean to waste that time.

For the moment, Aunt Phyllis's cabin wasn't being watched.

She went back inside the cabin. She went first to the bunk. Her pillow was undisturbed, and the first shard of Excalibur, the sharp point and a few inches of pitted steel – if it was steel – was still where she had foolishly left it, wrapped in a tensor bandage. She pulled up her dirty T-shirt and wrapped the shard tight to her skin again. Then she tugged her shirt down and picked up the phone.

It was an old rotary-dial model, and she was sure it was a landline: she'd looked outside and traced the wires to

where they disappeared into the lake, presumably running along the lake bed. It seemed unlikely it came anywhere near the Internet, which was a good thing, since Rex Major's – Merlin's – software ran much of the Internet and was infused with a tiny amount of magic, allowing him to... well, she and Wally had never been entirely sure *what* it allowed him to do – except for little things like bringing a computer-game monster to life with the help of a demon from some other dimension, of course – but they'd assumed he could, at the very least, use that magic to find them.

He doesn't have to find Wally, she thought with more than a trace of bitterness. *But he could still find me.*

She hesitated a moment longer. She could simply zip across the water and see Aunt Phyllis in person, of course...but she didn't want to do that. She didn't want Aunt Phyllis to know where she was, for her own safety, and she particularly didn't want Aunt Phyllis to know that she'd been hiding out just a couple of hundred metres away without bothering to make her presence known. And she couldn't be *entirely* certain Major didn't have a second watcher posted somewhere nearby.

She lifted the handset, heard the dial tone, and dialed.

One ring...two rings...she wondered, if she stuck her head out the front door, if she'd be able to hear it ringing across the water.

The ringing stopped. "Hello?" said Aunt Phyllis's voice.

Ariane suddenly found her throat had gone dry. She couldn't speak.

"Hello?" Aunt Phyllis said again, sounding a little irritated.

"Hi," Ariane managed to croak at last. "Hi, Aunt Phyllis."

"Ariane?" Even over the old phone line, Ariane could hear the immense relief in Aunt Phyllis's voice. "Where are you? Are you still in France?"

“No,” Ariane said. “I’m back.”

“Back? Back where? Canada?” Now Aunt Phyllis’s voice changed. “Then why aren’t you here?”

“I...” Ariane swallowed. “Aunt Phyllis, I...I don’t dare join you.”

“What? Don’t be ridiculous, Ariane, you have to.”

“I can’t, Aunt Phyllis,” Ariane said miserably. “It’s not safe. If Rex Major finds out I made it back safely, he might kidnap you to try to make me give up my shard of Excalibur.”

“*Your* shard...you mean he has the other one?” Aunt Phyllis said. “How did that happen?”

“Wally,” Ariane said. “It was Wally.”

“Wally?” Aunt Phyllis said. “I don’t understand...”

“He betrayed me,” Ariane said. Those words, too, were hard to force out of her throat. “He lied to me. He joined Merlin. He tricked me into giving him one of the shards. And then he left me all alone.” Even now the horror of that moment when she had come out of the shower to discover Wally and the second shard gone brought tears to her eyes...tears, and anger.

Anger that flowed from the shard as much as from her. Once again she felt the flood of ice-cold rage the sword was so good at generating. *Kill your enemies, make them pay, take revenge...*

I’ll make him pay, she assured it. *I will.*

“Wally?” Aunt Phyllis said. “I can’t believe it. Ariane, he must just be tricking Rex Major. I’ll bet he’s got some scheme to get the shard for you.”

“*I had* the shard,” Ariane said harshly. “I had it, and he stole it. Wally Knight is my enemy, Aunt Phyllis. As much as Rex Major.”

“Ariane...”

“I just called to tell you I’m all right,” she said. “And that I can’t join you. And that you’re being watched. I’m

going after the third shard. Just stay put and you should be fine.”

“Ariane, no,” Aunt Phyllis said. “You can’t do this alone. You need my help. Come to Emma Lake. There must be some way you can get into the cabin without being seen. We can talk, figure things out –”

“No, Aunt Phyllis,” Ariane said. “This is my quest. Mine alone. I’ll let you know when I have the third shard.”

“Ariane –”

Ariane hung up. She stared at the phone in the cradle. *That was a mistake*, she thought. *I shouldn’t even have called her. Now she’s going to worry even more.*

Then she thought, *I can’t stay here.*

That much she was certain of. Not only was she out of food and water, but Major’s man would be back in a couple of hours, settling into the cabin to keep a leisurely watch on Aunt Phyllis, waiting for Ariane to make an appearance.

He can rot here, Ariane thought viciously. *I won’t be anywhere near.*

But then...where?

She couldn’t go back to the house she’d shared with Aunt Phyllis in Regina. She was sure Major must be watching it, too. But she had to have *somewhere* to stay. She needed fresh clothes. She needed food. And she needed somewhere with water, a pool deep enough to cover her, deep enough for her to materialize in...

And then it hit her. The perfect solution, and she couldn’t believe she hadn’t thought of it before.

Wally’s house.

It had a swimming pool. It was empty: Wally’s parents had separated; Wally was with Rex Major; and his sister, Felicia – Flish – was still in hospital, and had moved out weeks ago, so she wouldn’t be returning to the house even

after she was released. Last time Ariane had been there, the cupboards and fridge had been stuffed with food. Mrs. Carson had been hired to look after the Knight siblings, but with both of them gone, she wouldn't be living there – although she might still be checking on the house once a day. But all Ariane needed to do to dodge Mrs. Carson, or anyone else who might come into the place, was to run water in the sink.

As long as she was careful, she could live in Wally's house undetected, for as long as she needed...until the third shard manifested itself. And the fact she'd be living rent-free at Wally's expense just made it all that much more perfect.

She glanced around the old cabin. Everything looked the same as she had left it when she'd gotten up that morning. She didn't disturb it – she didn't want Major's man noticing anything had changed. No doubt he was wondering if she'd been there, but he couldn't be sure it had been anything more than a tramp. And that meant Rex Major couldn't be sure.

She was still one step ahead. For the moment.

She slipped out the back door, went down to the lakeshore, and let the water take her away.