Prologue

The Whisper of Stars

St. Vey, November 18, 1891—late on a stormy night

The first bell rang as water poured through the open gate into the courtyard below.

The young woman stood in the observatory's viewing room, at the top of the west tower, a little apart from the main building. Rain lashed through the damaged dome. She held a lantern with a scrap of cloth wrapped around its hot handle.

Star charts lay on the table. One corner had soaked up the rain and was slowly curling.

Far below the observatory, a storm surge was flooding the harbor. People fled up the steep streets toward the observatory courtyard. From there, a stone bridge crossed a ravine to a square on higher ground. To reach the bridge, they had to pass through an archway at the foot of the tower.

Rainwater gathered between the courtyard's paving stones. It streamed from the roofs and splashed beneath the fleeing people's feet. High above them, the storm shook the tower roof.

In the room at the top of the tower, the young man stood beside the window overlooking the courtyard. He held a rope taut with both hands. It was part of the old hoist that raised the heavy iron

gate inside the archway. But the catch that should have held the gate up had broken. If he let go, the gate would drop, blocking the way to the bridge.

“A little farther,” she said.

“I’m trying.”

His fingers were raw. He braced a foot against the wall and pulled again. Below, the gate rose a little higher. Above them, a gust tore at the damaged dome, widening the gap in the roof by a hand’s width.

A star appeared. Just one, between the clouds.

She set the lantern on the table and picked up the silver pendant. It was round, about an inch across. Two narrow silver arcs had been fitted together to form a circle. Fine lines were engraved in the metal. While making it, he had accidentally extended one line too far. She had teased him about it.

Her thumb traced the familiar groove. Then she closed her hand tightly around the amulet.

The shimmering passage to the bridge became clear again. The people kept moving.

The second bell rang.

Someone called a name in the courtyard below. A child answered. Then a door slammed, and the rain swallowed their voices.

“They’re reaching the square on the other side,” he said.

She looked toward the window. Lanterns moved through the darkness, one behind another. People carried bundles. Someone had draped a blanket

around another person's shoulders. The smallest lantern wobbled so much that a child must have been carrying it.

With a sharp crack, a split opened in the wall beside the door.

A thin trail of dust fell over a ship someone had painted on the plaster years ago. She had never found out who. The mast was much too tall. A tiny dog stood on the deck, one ear sticking out sideways.

Something crashed beyond the door. The floor shook. She looked at the young man, but he still couldn't let go of the rope. There were people on the bridge.

The third bell rang.

The last small lantern reached the far end of the bridge. Only then did he release the rope. She kept hold of the amulet. With her free hand, she lifted the lantern from the table and passed it to him.

He held it over the threshold. Where the staircase had been, there was now a gaping hole. A heavy roof beam hung among the broken steps.

He backed away and went to the window. The tower wall dropped straight down to the paved courtyard. The rope attached to the hoist was much too short to climb down. He set the lantern on the floor beside the window.

"The stairs are gone," he said.

She joined him. Beyond the bridge, the last of the people were reaching the square on higher ground. A woman waved her lantern.

“They’re across,” she whispered.

Something cracked behind them. A piece of plaster fell. The split beside the door grew wider.

He pulled her away from the wall. But the floor was groaning beneath their feet, too.

“I wanted to move into the house with you tomorrow,” he said.

“The one with the crooked garden fence?”

“I would have fixed that.”

“You said that about the chair.”

He gave a short laugh. Then he took her hand.

She opened her palm, holding out the amulet. He laid his hand over hers and held it firmly. The silver rested between their hands.

“If there’s an afterward,” she said, “don’t look for the dress. Or my face.”

“What should I look for?”

She rested her forehead against his.

“You’ll know when I’m right again.”

He kissed her forehead.

A roof beam snapped above them. It struck the floor with a deafening crash, tearing through the boards. The lantern tipped over and went out.

He wrapped his arms around her.

“I’ll find you.”

Then the floor gave way.

The upper part of the tower collapsed, carrying them both down with it. They died that night.

In the square beyond the bridge, people turned at the deafening roar. Where the dome had stood above the rooftops, there was only dark sky.