

# Chapter 1

## Excerpt

Kalindi Rose ran through the open field, her boots springing over the close-cropped grass. She hitched up her skirt and climbed the stile, sprinting down the cobblestone road to the manor house. The brood mares lifted their heads, nickering softly as she passed. Magpies in the surrounding oaks chortled, and a single raven swooped overhead, letting out a raucous caw. She took the front steps two at a time, her hand stretching towards the ceramic flowerpots. Her fingertips brushed the spring blossoms, red pansies with deep orange centres and yellow daffodils on tall green stems. She laughed, wiggling out of her backpack and tossing it onto the verandah swing-seat.

‘Mama? John’ra? Guess what!’ she called, grabbing for the brass latch.

Her fingers never touched the handle. The door was ajar, slowly creaking open with a draught of wind. She stuck her foot forward, stopping it from banging into the wall.

‘Mama?’

The sound of her voice disappeared amid the drone of cicadas coming from the cherry orchard. She frowned. No-one left the front doors open on the

Matosh Estate. It wasn't allowed.

'Where is everyone?' she whispered.

Nothing moved except the rise and fall of her chest and the flutter of the wind through the dogwood trees. Suddenly the magpies took flight, the cicadas went silent. Light doused the verandah, the sunset shooting long red fingers into the empty foyer. As it dropped lower it disappeared, obscured by the inevitable fog bank that rolled in from the sea. It would be dark soon, the air moist and thick. Why had no-one seen to the lanterns?

Kalindi willed her heartbeat to steady. Most likely her little brother, D'ran, would pop out from behind the door, all screams and hands like bear claws. Her mother would call for her to help with the lamps and set the table. Her father would arrive in a flurry, his horse lathered and fussed, the man roaring his discontent with some trade agreement or the price of beans. The dogs would rush up with their barks and wags of excitement.

*Any minute . . .* She strained to catch a sound above her breathing as the sky turned purple, and Ishtar, the evening star, emerged.

*This is silly.* She straightened her shoulders and forced a laugh. *Everyone's probably in the library, or out back. They can't be far away.*

She stepped across the threshold. A draught rushed

down the hall to meet her, causing wisps of hair to tickle her face. She brushed them away with both hands, flipping her long plait behind her.

No lanterns glowed. No candles burned on their wrought-iron stands. It was like a dream where things were familiar yet not quite right. Feeling her way along with one hand on the wall, she stopped at the first doorway and looked in. It was the library, usually the brightest place in the house. John'ra insisted the fire be kept going all night, even in the summer. He said it was for inspiration. The library was dark now, abandoned. No fire. No light. No inspiration.

She stumbled into the reading table as she searched for a candle. Finding one, she struck a match, the sound tearing through the air. It flared up for a moment then died out as the wick caught flame.

*What was that?* She froze.

It might have been a nightjar in the pine trees, or footsteps on the front verandah. Whatever it was, it stopped short, along with her breath. She swallowed, fighting the dryness in her throat, listening hard for the sound again. When it didn't return, she crept out of the library to search the rest of the house. Room by room she went, looking for her family and any hint of what had happened; and room by room she found nothing unusual except for the emptiness, and the dark.

By the time she reached the kitchen she was shaking.

*What's that smell?*

peering in. The pantry shelves were full of jars — fruits and nuts, pasta and rice — all in their places. The spices sat in little wooden boxes, orderly and undisturbed, and the pots and pans hung in nested ranks above the stove, their copper bottoms glinting in the candlelight. She caught her reflection in one, and saw the others there too.

The blood drained from her face. She'd found her family.

Mama, John'ra, D'ran and two members of the household staff were laid out on the floor like freshly chopped wood. Glazed eyes stared at the ceiling and walls, necks at unusual angles, limbs askew. There were drag marks across the floor, leading out into the hall. Blood splattered their clothes, matting her mother's hair and obscuring her face.

Kalindi looked away, unable to shut her eyes. They came to rest on the sink as she backed up. The basin was filled with a dark liquid, steam rising from the surface.

'Mama?' Tears spilled down her face.

A creaking on the verandah spun her around. It wasn't a nightjar. Voices rose and fell, arguing in harsh, guttural sounds, like boots kicking gravel.

She dropped the candle and raced blindly down the hall, her footfalls silent on the thick carpets. Pushing through the back screen door, she vaulted over the

railing and tore down the path, leaping the garden fence without breaking stride. Staying low, she kept to the grassy edges of the walkways so her boots wouldn't tap out a signalling *here I am!* Circling wide, she crawled under the paddock fence and into the fields that bordered the estate. She ran, fell down, scrambled up and ran again.

She looked behind once. No light came from the house, its outline a black etch on the horizon, a dark shadow about to be swallowed up by the encroaching fog. The only sound she could hear came from the pigpens: distant grunts and screams.

She kept running, legs working hard and eyes wide open. Darkness blurred the landscape until she could distinguish only the shiny cobbled road in front of her. She followed it, heart pounding.

Kalindi had no plan. She couldn't think to make one. Her pace slowed as she reached the entrance gate — the wrought-iron pillar cold to the touch. No-one was coming, at least not anyone with a light. Hesitating for only a second, she let her hand slide off the post and dashed out of the estate.

Her pace quickened as the road sloped down to the densely treed valley. She couldn't see it, but she knew it was there, a dark outline against a deeper darkness — the forest of Espiro Dell Ray. If she could get to those

would be safe.

‘Assalo!’

She stopped suddenly, feeling the vibration of hoofbeats pounding up the paddock. They reverberated through the ground and up her legs as the tall black horse appeared. He halted above her, pressing his chest into the fence, soft wickers blowing from his nostrils.

‘It’s all right, Assalo,’ she whispered. ‘I’ll get you out of here, but we have to be quick and we have to be silent.’

The horse pawed the ground, churning up grass and dirt, his four white socks bright in the early night. Kalindi Rose climbed up the embankment and stroked Assalo’s neck, flipping strands of his long black mane over to the other side of his crest. He lowered his head, pushing it between the rails to smell her boots before nipping at her bare legs. She pressed her cheek against his shoulder and took a deep breath.

‘Come on,’ she said, pushing off from him and sliding down the embankment. She hit the road running. ‘To the gate. Follow.’

He trotted along the fence line above her until a whizzing sound cut through the air. They were firing at Assalo! She dropped to the ground when she heard the thud of an arrow finding its mark. She scrambled up and ran, choking on the bile in her throat.

Assalo squealed so loudly, she couldn’t hear her boots crunching on the gravel, or the involuntary gasps

coming out as she sucked in the air between cries. His agony reverberated into the night, drowning out every other noise, drowning out her thoughts.

She reached the edge of Espiro Dell Ray, her lungs burning and her face streaked with tears. She didn't stop. She plunged into the forest, keeping to the edge of the main road. By the time it had dwindled into a narrow track, she couldn't hear Assalo anymore. She couldn't see anything through her tears.

After an hour of feeling her way in the dark tangle of branches, vines and dead wood, she stumbled into a hollowed-out redwood trunk. With her hand on the mossy bark, she steadied her breath, checking for the presence of other creatures. It felt vacant. She crawled through the opening, pressing herself against the back wall and bringing her knees up to her chin. She sat there staring into the night, listening.

Crickets hummed and wings flapped. A nighthawk called from far away, answered by an even more distant cry. No one followed.

After another hour of listening, she dug into the leaf mould and curled up, sobbing herself to sleep.

'You made a right mess of this,' Archer growled, bending to grab the dead man's hands. He started to drag the body out of the kitchen. 'Get his legs.'

Rogg gripped the ankles, hoisting the other half of the corpse. 'I didn't start it, Arch.' He nodded to the

body. ‘This bugger did.’

‘*She* said to get the vial and not hurt ’em — any of ’em.’

Rogg laughed. ‘He ain’t hurting now. Besides, that other witch didn’t care.’

‘Idiot.’ Archer glared as he backed down the hallway.

‘That other one had her own purpose. It’s the High Priestess who’s got the gold. What if she won’t pay us now?’

‘Didn’t think of that.’ Rogg stared blankly at Archer as he manoeuvred the body through the front door frame. He frowned. ‘What if she curses us?’

‘She won’t.’

‘She’s a witch.’

‘I can handle her.’

‘And our pay?’

‘We’ll get it.’ Archer winked as he lifted the body higher to keep the head from bumping down the front steps.

‘How?’

‘We’ll trick her.’

Rogg didn’t respond immediately. He dropped one of the booted feet to scratch his matted hair. ‘Can you trick a witch?’

‘She’s only a woman, Rogg.’

‘I don’t know about that.’

Archer ignored him, his face twisting into a smile.

‘She said, “*I need the blood of the witch-child*”.’

‘What’s that mean?’

‘Shut up. I’m thinking.’

Archer stopped in front of the pigsty. The animals were grunting, pressing their snouts against the low wooden fence.

‘*She* wants the blood. Said so right to me face.’ He started swinging the corpse, nodding to Rogg to do the same. ‘We’ll bleed the small one before it sets. He must be the witch-child.’

Rogg didn’t answer. He was watching an enormous boar standing with his front feet on the top rail of the sty. His mouth opened as he squealed, saliva dripping from his lower jaw in long, translucent loops.

‘We’ll make it look like a blood-vengeance,’ Archer went on, the body gaining momentum as he spoke. On the third swing, they heaved it over the top rail and into the pigsty.

‘We sack the place? Turn it over real good?’ Rogg asked, his eyes brightening.

‘And take the blood of the witch-child.’

‘Then we get paid?’

‘Yeah. We get paid.’

‘And that other one? With the strange questions?’

‘She wanted them all dead anyway. We’re good.’

Archer spat before heading back to the house, the pig squeals turning into chomps.