



CHAPTER ONE

The grave that Lin had made for her friend could not be touched by wind. Above, the dripping rose-bush flailed, scratching its thorns at the wall. But the whittled cross of twigs and string did not so much as shiver. Instead a lick of rime had crept up to cover the wood with white. Later, Lin Rosenquist would remember this as a sign, the first.

Perhaps she might have caught it then, if she hadn't been too busy watching the storm. It came from the north and roared up the river, wrenching through the cobbled streets of Oldtown, pulling dusk down between the wooden houses in the early afternoon. Lin stood by Mrs. Ichalar's flower bed, with her hand in her pocket, grinning to herself. At last, a storm that showed some promise! She crouched down to whisper to the cross, "See you later, little one."

The front door groaned when she opened it. The house her parents rented from Mrs. Ichalar leaned out over the river, supported by tarred poles on one side. Like the other narrow houses crammed together along the bank, the whole building had been warped by centuries in the bitter mist. It smelled crooked, too. Whiffs of rotten wood and chemicals drifted from floor to floor to hide behind the curtains.

Lin hung her coat next to the grandfather clock in the hallway. A husky recording of gnarled voices and violins seeped out from the kitchen. Her mother was working in there.

“Lindelin, is that you at last?” The music stopped and Anne Rosenquist appeared in the doorway. At the sight of Lin’s drenched coat, her face clouded over with concern. “Have you been standing by the rosebush again? In this weather?”

“I’m not that wet,” Lin lied as she squelched out of her boots. “I just need to go upstairs and . . .”

“Don’t go up just yet,” her mother said quickly. “I’ve made rice pudding, your favorite.”

Dessert before dinner. That was ominous.

Lin followed her into the kitchen that also doubled as a study. Her mother collected old songs that would otherwise have died with the last people who knew them. In August, she had unexpectedly been offered a teaching position at the university. It meant that she could pass them

on, all those theories on broken knights and bergfolk. But it also meant that the Rosenquists had to leave Summerhill, the farm where Lin had lived for all her eleven years, where the fields smelled of freshly turned soil and the mountains hugged the stars between their peaks.

“What a nasty squall.” Her mother shoved aside some notebooks to make room for the fluffy pudding and raspberry sauce. The rice cream recipe was ancient, too, a Summerhill tradition with chopped candied almonds sprinkled on top. “There could be snow at the end of it, though,” her mother added. “Wouldn’t you like that?”

Lin did like snow, though she wasn’t sure what good it would do here. At home, she and her best friend, Niklas, would have snowball fights until their fingers were numb and blue, and they would have to warm them on Grandma Alma’s giant cups of hot chocolate. And when dusk crept down the mountain slopes, they would make snow lights, little igloos with candles inside, that sent flickering beams up the frozen stream. “The better to ward off the enemy,” Niklas would laugh, and Lin would laugh as well, scanning the forest edge for eyes.

“I’m afraid there’ll be no snow for you just yet, Miss Rosenquist.” Her father came sauntering into the kitchen, sat down at the table, and dug the serving spoon into the rice cream. “It will rain for another week at least.”

“Surely not a whole week,” her mother said, but of course she knew better. Harald Rosenquist owned a rain

gauge, four thermometers, and no less than three barometers in well-polished frames. He kept temperature records and checked the forecast several times a day. So if he said it would rain for another week, it would.

“I heard one of your songs today, Lin,” her mother said, and hummed brightly as she heaped pudding into a bowl.

Lin knew the tune, it was the one with the hair. She was named for her mother’s greatest discovery, the ballads of fair Lindelin, who grew enchanted apples, and rescued princes, and spun her locks into gold. *My daughter deserves to be the hero of a song*, her mother liked to say. But her mother didn’t have to spend the first weeks at a new school explaining why her name was so strange. Picking up her spoon, Lin said, “It’s not exactly my song, Mom. And my hair is the opposite of gold.”

“Remember what I told you about reading songs? Gold doesn’t always mean gold.” Her mother’s mouth twitched into a smile. “Your father and I have some exciting news to share. My class is full for next term already. They want me to stay, at least until next summer.” She saw Lin’s face and amended it to, “*Only* until next summer. Another year at the most.”

Another year in Mrs. Ichalar’s skeleton-legged house. Lin put her spoon down. It clattered against the table.

After a brief silence, her father cleared his throat. “You know what? I think it’s time for a riddle.” It was their little ritual, one Lin used to love when she was younger. Every

night, over tea and sweet buns in the Morello House kitchen, she would decipher badly worded poems and pore over treasure maps or quizzes until she came up with the right answer. “Are you ready?” He winked at her. “How do you spell deadly mousetrap with only three letters?”

“Harald!” Her mother’s face went white. “Don’t . . .”

“What? It’s too easy?”

Lin’s hand went to the left pocket of her cardigan. With one half of his head filled with novel writing and the other half with pudding, her father had forgotten about Rufus. But she didn’t feel like talking about it, so she answered, “C—A—T.”

“Perfect,” her father laughed. “One point to Miss Rosenquist!”

“If you’d like, we could go to the museum again on Saturday,” her mother said. “Or the library? Or the cathedral? And I could make you peppernut cookies! They’re your favorite, right? You know, they match your . . .”

“My eyes, I know.” Lin pushed her chair back. “Actually, I am soaked through. I’ll go change.” Her parents began to speak in soft voices as soon as she left the room.

On her way up the stairs, she skipped the squeaky steps. She liked to move silently in this house, so the grandfather clocks and hulking furniture wouldn’t hear her coming. The bureau on the second-floor landing seemed especially malevolent. Lin always stopped in front of it, to prove she wasn’t scared. Her mother had

noticed and dressed it up with a lace runner and two of Lin's favorite photos.

The first photo, Summerhill viewed from the mountains. It seemed so small from afar, just a patchwork of meadows and potato fields stitched around a barn, an ancient elm tree, and the two houses. Niklas lived with his grandmother and uncle in the long, white main house with many shadowy rooms in a row, too many for such a small family, Grandma Alma always said. Therefore she had invited the Rosenquists to live in the red house in the morello garden, so Anne could work on her song collection, and Harald could work on his novels, and Lin could climb straight from her bedroom window into the sweet cherry tree, to work on her pit spitting with Niklas.

The second photo, Lin and her father sitting on the slopes of Butterspot. He was smiling, completely unaware that he was being tricked, and Lin was frowning, keeping both her lips and her left pocket pressed tight around her secret.

Rufus.

She had just found him when that photo was taken. He had been lying in the heather, not far from the entrance to a burrow. His left leg had been bleeding, and he was panting so hard his rust-colored back and gray flanks trembled. A mouse pup, Lin had thought, and though she knew she should call to her father so he could put the little thing out of its misery, she had instead lifted the mouse

gently and put him in her pocket. Back in her room, she had fed him bread crumbs and cheese rinds and watched his wound heal. But it hadn't taken Harald Rosenquist long to sniff out the secret.

"You do *realize*, Miss Rosenquist," he had said in his most serious lecturing tone, "this mouse is not a pet. In fact, it's not even a mouse, but a *Myodes rufocanus*, a red-back vole. It belongs in the wild, not in a child's room. You cannot possibly keep it."

In the end it was her parents who had to *realize* that Lin would not give up Rufus. They had insisted on a cage, and Lin had agreed, and even kept the cage by her bed. But Rufus had never lived there. He lived in her cardigan, her favorite blue one that Grandma Alma had knitted, where he nestled in the left pocket and chewed the tassels of the drawstring in the collar. Out in the woods, he rode on her shoulder, whiskers wide and claws dug deep. On the farm, he kept out of view from everyone except Niklas, and he had a special knack for scrambling into her sleeve two seconds before her father crossed the yard. In the city, Rufus had been her only friend, her only tie to home. He had slept curled up on her pillow, and when she scratched him, he had leaned against her fingers to say he understood.

But as the trees shed their leaves and the afternoons grew dim, Rufus had changed. He stopped sneaking off on nightly expeditions, and he no longer raided Lin's plate

for cheese. Once, he had tumbled from her shoulder and fallen hard to the floor, and after that he kept to her pocket, even when they were alone. One crisp Tuesday five weeks ago, there was no brush of whiskers on her cheek in the morning. Rufus had quietly crept into his cage to sleep, and there was nothing Lin could do to wake him.

She had buried the shoe box under the rosebush because that happened to be the sole patch of uncobbled ground on the street, and she had spent so many afternoons there that her parents had taken to hovering like moons in the kitchen window. “Would you like to have someone over?” they had asked, all chipper and hopeful, as if it were that simple. “Someone from school, perhaps?”

Lin shut the door to her attic room. She went straight to her closet, which she kept so messy no one else would bother to go near it. Her trap, the paper clip on the handle, had not been sprung. Under her worn hiking pants, she found the thing that had lured her away from Rufus’s grave.

The troll-hunting casket.

She pulled the carved box out on the floor and checked the contents: A magnifying glass, to make sunbeams strong enough to cut through bark-and-sap armor. A roll of maps that she had drawn, with marks for all three precious oak trees. And a small jar of carefully gathered acorns, the only weapon that would kill a troll outright.

It had all begun with a jar like this, the one she and

Niklas had found among Grandma Alma's old fishing gear in the Summerhill loft. The faded label had said TROLL'S BANE. From that seed, the troll hunt had grown, game by delicious game, into the Summerhill woods and all the way up to the Trollheim Mountains.

Lin unscrewed the lid, letting out an acrid puff of air. It was her special concoction. Since bright sunlight turned trolls to stone, and since sunburns and nettle welts were much the same, curing the acorns in a brew of nettles and sour leaf made them even more lethal. But she didn't take any. The acorns were for Summerhill trolls, wood trolls who slept under rock and sniffed under trees. Oldtown trolls lived in sewers and slime, so the acorns would not work on them. Their bane would be different, something that could be found naturally in the area, something very rare. She just hadn't figured out what it was yet.

She riffled through the map rolls. There were six of them, all drawn after her father had sent Lin and Niklas out to add details to a map of the Summerhill woods. He had needed it as research for his novel. But ever since, Lin had created her own maps for the troll hunt, with legends for sightings and lairs. She picked out her work in progress—a map of Oldtown—and put the casket back into the wardrobe.

Her cardigan had damp stripes along the shoulders, but she pulled it back on over dry pajamas, tied the drawstring, and climbed onto the windowsill. Lin rolled out

the map, turning it so it fit her view. She had penciled in a few potential lairs, but there were no marks for sightings, because in the three months since they had moved to the city, she had not seen a single troll. But now there was a storm, a terrific one. That always brought the enemy out, to roar back at the wind.

Lin leaned close to the window, peering through the sharp raindrops that pelted the glass.

“Come on,” she whispered. “I’m ready.”

At the end of the street, by the foot of the bridge, there were two flashes.

Lin sat up hard, squinting toward the red pillars. It must have been a coincidence, a bicycle light cut in half by the bridge post or reflected in a sign. But no. There it was again, two blinks in quick succession, this time in the window of the closed coffee shop across the street.

In the troll hunt, this was the fastest and easiest of signals, because it was also the most desperate: Danger. Trolls nearby.

She pressed her brow to the pane, holding her breath so it wouldn’t cloud the glass. Did something stir in the violent sheets of rain, a billow of cloth, a flitting shape against the cobblestones? The third signal appeared where Lin could only see its halo. Right below her, on Mrs. Icharlar’s steps.

Lin pushed herself off the windowsill, stuck her feet in her slippers, and raced for the stairs. Summerhill was

a long and expensive bus ride away, and in his last letter, Niklas had written nothing about coming here. Yet he must have, because only he knew that signal.

She hadn't reached farther than the second-floor bureau when she heard the mail slot creak and clack. And as she rushed down the remaining steps, she got her first glimpse of it, a small, flat parcel, lying facedown on Mrs. Ichalar's musty doormat.

The slap of wet wind met her when she tore the door open. She looked up the street and down the street. It was deserted. "Niklas!" she called. "I know you're there!" But he was not done with his game, it seemed, because he didn't emerge from the murk. A square of wan light illuminated Rufus's grave, making it glitter. The thin layer of frost covered almost the whole flower bed now. It must be getting colder after all.

Shivering, Lin retreated into the hallway to examine the parcel. The rough paper was the color of a broken mountainside, and bound in sodden string. She turned it over, and a chill hand caught her heart.

Niklas could not have sent her this parcel. No one could.

On the front, there was no stamp and no address. Only a single word, written not by pen or pencil, but scratched into the wet paper with the sharp tip of a knife.

"Twistrose."