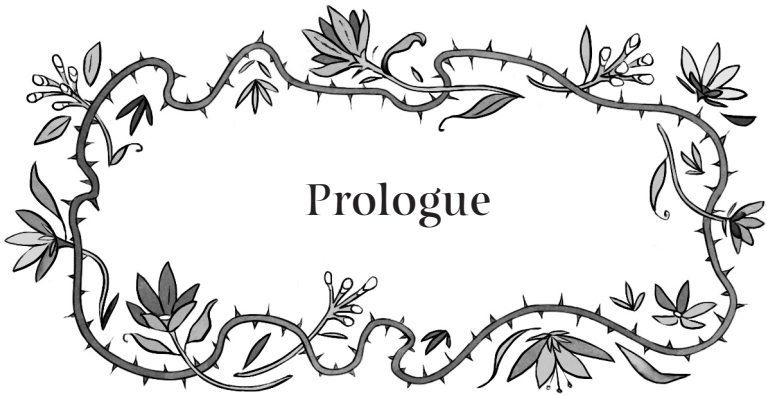


EVERGLADE

RISE OF THE WITCH

KITTY BLACK





Prologue

WHO WANTS A STORY? COME, SMALL HUMANS,
and gather at my feet!

Not that close. That's on my feet. Physical contact is not required.

There. That's a satisfactory distance.

Listen closely, children of Everglade. This is the most important story you will ever learn. The Mayor says this is the only story that matters.

A long time ago, when people were even more ignorant than they are now, our world held ... magic.

Do not gasp, children. It is unnecessary.

This magic came from the Fates. It spread across the land like a rash—

Why do you have your hand up? Do you have a question?

No? You want to show me your rash.

Oh, my. On an unrelated note, could you please move up the back? Yes, that's it, keep going. Good.

Where was I? Ah, yes. Along with magic came magic-kin: those creatures such as fairies; and mer-folk; and the chatty, animal ones; and the big, stompy cave ones – what are they called, again? They're like lizards, but hot ...

Dragons! Yes! Gold star for you.

What? What do you want?

No, I do not actually have a gold star. It's an expression.

You're leaking. If you're going to leak, go sit up the back next to Rashy. Go on.

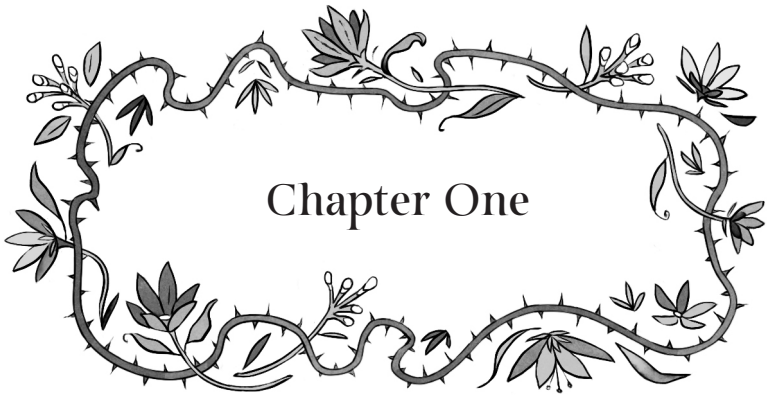
Ahem. I need to find my place again. Right! You might think that magic-kin were the worst that magic could inflict on us. But you'd be wrong. Magic dug deeper. It went further. A new terror was created.

WITCHES.

Know this, children. Witches were nasty, vile creatures! Witches were as sly as a snake hiding in spaghetti. Witches would smile as they lied, laugh as you cried, and always, always betray you.

There wasn't a witch alive who could be trusted.

Luckily for you, there aren't any witches left alive.



Chapter One

WREN WESTERLY STEPPED OUT OF HER bedroom door, her stomach coiling into knots.

Not nervous are you, Wren? asked the sludge. Its voice was raspy and bitter in Wren's mind.

Wren ignored it and stared down the brightly varnished staircase that led to the living room and kitchen of Aunt Nancy's aggressively tidy house. The stairs looked the same as they always did, but today they didn't *feel* the same. Wren didn't want to go downstairs. Going downstairs meant the day had started, and Wren was not keen on today.

The day itself was a picture-perfect Sunday. Wren looked out the window and saw sunshine, blue skies and merrily drifting clouds. Any other day, she would have enjoyed merrily drifting clouds. Today, she hated them. The clouds

continued to drift across the sky, unbothered by criticism. Wren exhaled heavily. She didn't hate clouds. It wasn't their fault she was feeling this way.

Then whose fault is it? The sludge wound sinuously around the knots in Wren's stomach, tightening them further. She took a hasty step downwards, her foot landing louder than usual.

Everglade's fault, hissed the sludge. *Everglade's FAULT.*

Wren gritted her teeth and took another step, then another, and another. *At least Aunt Nancy isn't already waiting*, Wren thought. *Aunt Nancy despised—*

'I despise waiting,' Aunt Nancy sailed out from the kitchen, her lavender heels click-clacking on the tiles.

She raised a silver eyebrow at Wren, who had frozen mid-step. Spurred into action, Wren took the last half of the staircase in a hasty series of leaps, landing breathlessly on the hallway runner.

'Are we late?' Wren wheezed, placing one hand on her hip in an attempt to be casual.

'We're not early.' Aunt Nancy's eyebrow dropped like a guillotine.

Aunt Nancy was intimidating. This was confusing because, on the surface, Aunt Nancy had no right to be intimidating. She was tiny and, in Wren's opinion, old. Fine lines criss-crossed her light brown skin like cracks on an expensive teacup. In fact, if there was ever a fight between Aunt Nancy and a teacup, most people would put their money on the teacup. Unless they actually knew Aunt Nancy. Then, they'd do whatever she told them to.

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Wren tried to do *most* of what Aunt Nancy told her to. It was just that Aunt Nancy asked her to do so many things, and a lot of them were, frankly, impossible. And then there were the things that Aunt Nancy didn't *ask* her to do, but still *expected* her to do. As if Wren, a somewhat chaotic twelve-year-old who happened to be the most hated person in town, could predict the expectations of Aunt Nancy, the most terrifying member of the Everglade Council, and the kind of person who organised their sock drawer for *fun*. After nine years of co-habitation, Wren assumed she would disappoint Aunt Nancy in most things, and that Aunt Nancy had developed a flow chart demonstrating how.

'Today is a serious occasion,' said Aunt Nancy. 'It should be treated appropriately.'

'Of course,' said Wren, her eyes wide with what she hoped would be seen as innocence.

'Then why' – Aunt Nancy gestured towards Wren – 'are you wearing that?'

Wren glanced down at her outfit. She was wearing a vibrant orange t-shirt and red corduroy jeans. She'd tucked yellow pom-pom wildflowers into her thick chestnut braid, and she had rainbow laces on her sneakers.

Words to describe Wren's outfit would be *colourful*, or *fun*. Words that would not describe Wren's outfit would be *serious*, or perhaps, *suitable*.

Aunt Nancy was wearing a dark purple pantsuit the colour of a fresh bruise. It conveyed sophistication and a subtle hint of torture. It was appropriate. She tilted her

head to the side, waiting for Wren's answer. She looked like a judgemental eggplant.

'Um, well ...' Wren scratched at a mole on her arm. Her bronze skin was a warmer shade than Aunt Nancy's, especially after a summer of wearing t-shirts.

I'm wearing these clothes because these are my favourite colours, Wren wanted to say, and maybe they were hers too. I'm wearing my hair like this because she taught me how to braid, and I've seen the gardener pull out these wildflowers over and over, but they always grow back, and I like that. I chose to look like this because today hurts, and it's the only way I can get through it.

All the days hurt, muttered the sludge.

'... I don't know,' she said, finally.

Aunt Nancy exhaled, pressing a single finger to her temple. 'Wren,' she said, 'I want you to be careful today.'

Wren nodded. She didn't quite trust herself to speak.

Careful! Always so careful in Everglade! said the sludge in a mocking tone as it hugged Wren's ribs.

'You can't hide under a table the entire time,' said Aunt Nancy.

'I was five,' Wren mumbled.

'You can't climb a tree with that friend of yours and scream *CAW! CAW! WE'RE CROWS!* at anyone who asks you to come down.'

'We only did that once!' Wren protested.

'I want you to say the words.' Aunt Nancy's pale blue eyes were like chips of ice.

'I'll be careful,' said Wren, knowing those weren't the

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words Aunt Nancy wanted to hear. 'I promise.'

Aunt Nancy shook her head, the movement tectonically slow and with an air of the inevitable. 'Say it.'

Wren thought about running upstairs, slamming her door and crawling underneath the covers. But the monsters in Everglade knew how to open doors and peel back blankets.

Don't say it. The sludge bristled.

'I hate witches.' Wren's voice was low. 'I hate magic. I don't remember my mother.'

You said it. The sludge settled, resentful and heavy, in the bottom of Wren's lungs.

Aunt Nancy gave a small nod. 'Good.' She click-clacked down the hallway and opened the front door.

Wren couldn't blame Aunt Nancy for making her say it out loud. She was right. Today was dangerous for Wren.

After all, she was the daughter of a witch.