

## Chapter One: Sold

Alexis woke to the wind's cold fingers groping her face. She rolled over in the hay, stiff-necked and stuffy-nosed, then opened her eyes. It was night. High above her tall dark shapes swayed against a sky peppered with stars. Were they giants? No, trees. Pine, by the smell of them. Papa had stopped the wagon in a forest.

A dread she could not place flooded her. She moved to sit up, but something tightened around her throat. Her long, heavy plait had wrapped around her neck as she'd slept. She unwound it, feeling straw bristling from it, and with dismay imagined Gran's reaction: the disgusted frown, the weary sigh. Alexis would have to comb it and re-arrange it before they arrived. Her fingers shook. Why was she so frightened?

Metal shrieked on metal in the dark, startling Alexis into a sudden understanding of her fear: there were no forests on the road to Gran's. Where had Papa taken her?

'You gotta understand,' a man's voice said from somewhere not far off, 'there's no taking this back.' It wasn't Papa. And now there was a light. Alexis wiggled to the side of the wagon and peeked through the slats just as her father spoke:

'What I understand is this: a man can have more children, but he's nothin' without his land.'

Finally she could see him, standing with two strangers by an iron gate so tall it stretched away into the shadows. The first stranger had a lantern, and as he hung it from a hook on the gate she could see he was a small, balding fellow with a trim beard and a pencil tucked behind one ear. He didn't look dangerous.

The second stranger was another matter: he was one of the Artha. They were a race of bear-people whose country lay over the Northern Ocean. Many of them took up the sailor's life, and could be found in port towns like Linamere, where Alexis lived with Gran during school terms. She often watched from the road above the harbour as the Artha mended nets or gutted fish on the quay with their long claws. Most people—proper, civilised people—considered the Artha rough and ignorant, and that they always would be.

This one looked the part. He was half a head shorter than Papa, but half again as broad. He wore no shirt, but his furry gut lolled over a belt holding up a pair of canvas trousers. On one hip hung a large ring of keys; on the other a coiled whip. He picked his pointed teeth with a claw, and Alexis thrilled with fear: she had never seen one of his kind so close before.

Then one of his ears twitched in her direction. He turned, his eyes catching the light with a green glow, like a cat's.

'Martin,' he growled. 'She's up.'

Alarmed, the bald man looked towards the wagon. He began to walk towards her, followed by the bear. Papa stayed put.

*This must be a robbery, Alexis thought. I'll have to escape and get help.* She jumped out of the wagon and shimmied underneath it, scraping her shins on gravel. She lay flat on her belly, thinking, watching the man's boots and the bear's paws approach.

There was a road to her left—she could just make out the white edging-stones in the feeble light of the lantern. The bald man crouched down to look at her, wincing as his knees creaked like leather. 'You must be Alexis,' he said. In reply, she whipped a handful of gravel into his eyes, then streaked out from under the wagon like a weasel.

She bolted up the road. Behind her came shouts, followed by a jangle of keys: the bear! *Run!* Alexis commanded herself. *Fly, you feet; spin, you legs: run, RUN!*

It was no good. The road curved up a steep hill, and within a few dozen yards Alexis's lungs burned and her legs grew heavy. In spite of her fear and need, she began to slow. Then her head jerked backwards as the bear seized her long plait and began reeling her in. She kicked and tore at him as he slung her over his shoulder, but it made no difference. He carried her back down the hill to the open gate where the bald man, dabbing his eyes with the tail of his shirt, handed Papa a large sack. It clinked and jingled. Coins. A lot of them.

*What kind of robbers give you money?* Alexis thought. An idea black as tar bubbled up in her mind. 'Papa!' she shrieked.

He cradled the sack of coins. He walked towards the wagon. He never looked back, not once.

Beyond the gate stood a little house, where a candle glowed behind a dusty windowpane. Inside there was only one room, and, judging from the cobwebs, one rarely used. The bear sat Alexis on a stool in the middle of the floor and snapped manacles around her ankles, securing her to it. Then he went out a back door, leaving her with the bald man.

He was seated at a large ornate desk that seemed not to fit in the shabby room, writing in a big book bound in red leather. His scribbling went on for some time while the wind muttered in the

chimney, and ash from the cold fireplace swirled across the floor. Alexis sat with the blood roaring in her ears, shaking now from head to foot. She was a prisoner—what had Papa done?—where would she—?

*'Panic never solved anything,'* harrumphed a voice in her memory. Gran. Gran would find a way if she were here. So would Alexis. She took a deep breath, and then another. She sat up straight and smoothed her plait. If she were calm and pleasant, he might want to help her.

'Sir?' she asked, with only a slight waver in her voice.

'Mmm?' He took out a second book, identical to the first, and began to write in that, too.

'I'm awfully sorry I threw them—those rocks in your eyes,' she said, speaking as clearly as possible. She had a flatlander's drawl which six years of elocution lessons had failed to shift. People with coastal accents, like this man, found her hard to understand unless she formed her words deliberately.

'Mmm,' he said.

'It's only I was startled, and I think maybe there's been a mistake. I don't think Papa meant to leave me here—'

At this the bald man turned to her, his face grim. Alexis faltered. 'I mean,' she went on, 'This morning he told me—'

'What colour do you call that hair?' he asked.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Your hair. What is that, red or strawberry blonde or what?'

'Orange, sir.'

'Orange,' he repeated. 'Huh.' He turned back to his book and scribbled. 'Hair orange, eyes hazel,' he muttered.

'Green,' Alexis said. He looked at her again, and she opened her eyes wider, to show him: hard green, like a glass bottle full of something that fizzed.

'My mistake,' said the bald man. He drew a line, then resumed writing just as the bear returned through the back door. Under one shaggy arm he carried a cloth bundle with a pair of scissors tucked through the string.

'That was quick,' said the bald man, as the bear dropped his bundle on the floor.

'I ran,' said the bear. He glanced at Alexis. 'You told her yet?'

'I was getting around to it, Fat Carl,' the bald man said.

'You're getting soft, is what you're getting, Martin,' snarled the bear. 'I saw the Boss in the woods.'

The bald man licked his lips. 'At this hour?'

'Yeah. Walkin' the dog, I bet. He says for three-fifty she better be able to fly. He's not happy.'

The bald man made a small, strangled noise. Alexis, who had been listening intently, making mental notes (a boss, a dog, something about the Sagiit, Martin and Fat Carl) jumped when the bear suddenly turned to her.

'So what'd your daddy tell you, kid?' Fat Carl sneered. 'Was he gonna take you someplace nice?'

'He—he said my Gran's.'

'Your Gran's. That's a shame. Your pop lied to you, kid. That's how come Martin here is feeling all sorry for you. This is a salt mine. Your daddy sold you to us for three hundred and fifty gold regents.'

Alexis stared at him. 'You're lying,' she stammered.

The bear looked down at Martin's book. '*Purchased, slave, 8 August*, he read out, '*Female aged 11 years 11 months 3 days, wiry build, hair orange, eyes—What's that say?*'

'Green,' Martin muttered.

'*Eyes green. Payment 350, seller Edwin Farmer, father,*' Fat Carl concluded. 'It's in the book, kid.'

'You're *lying!*' she shouted. 'He would never, ever sell me—he loves me!'

The bear grinned. 'If he loves you so much, what are you doing here?'

Alexis had no answer. She began, at last, to cry.