

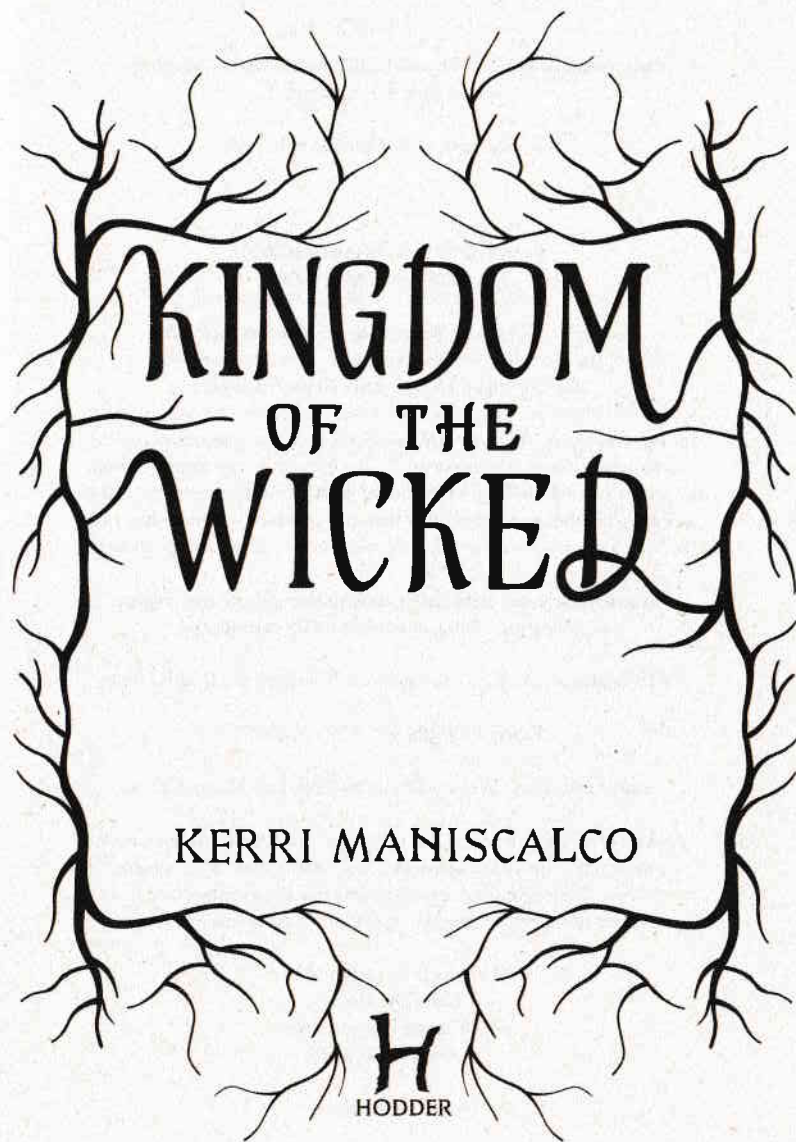
LBRIS

We know  
books

Also by Kerri Maniscalco

*Kingdom of the Wicked*

*Kingdom of the Cursed*



Emilia hesitated only a minute before clasping the golden horn in her palm.

A shimmering lavender-black light exploded from their amulets, startling Emilia enough that she dropped her sister's necklace. Vittoria swiftly fastened it back where it belonged, brown eyes wide as the glittering light abruptly faded. Both girls remained silent. Whether in fear or fascination, they couldn't be sure. Emilia flexed her hand, trying to work out the pin-prickling sensation crawling under her skin. Vittoria watched; her face hidden in shadow.

Nearly a hellhound howled up at the moon, though later they'd convince themselves it was only the wind snarling through the cramped streets of their quarter. They never told anyone what they'd done, and never spoke of the strange inky-purple light.

Not even to each other. And especially not to Nonna Maria.

Since they pretended the incident away, Emilia didn't tell her sister she'd been irrevocably changed—from that evening forward, whenever she held her *cornicello* and concentrated, she saw what she'd call *luccicare*. A faint shimmer or aura surrounding a person.

The only exceptions being herself and her twin.

If Vittoria also possessed this new talent, she never admitted so. It was the first of many secrets the twins would keep from each other. And would prove deadly for one.



# ONE

*Ten years later*

**Nonna Maria buzzed** around the kitchen like she'd guzzled every drop of espresso in our restaurant. Her mood was downright frantic. My twin was late for dinner service and our grandmother saw it as a portent of doom, especially since Vittoria was out the night before a holy day. Goddess forbid.

The fact that the moon was not only full, but also a putrid shade of yellow had Nonna muttering the kind of warnings that normally made my father bolt the doors. Thankfully he and Uncle Nino were in the dining room with a frosty bottle of limoncello, pouring after-dinner drinks for our customers. No one left Sea & Vine without sipping the dessert liqueur and feeling the utter satisfaction and bliss that followed a good meal.

"Mock me all you like, but it's not safe. Demons are prowling the streets, searching for souls to steal." Nonna chopped cloves of garlic for the scampi, her knife flying across the worn cutting board. If she wasn't careful, she'd lose a finger. "Your sister is foolish to be out." She stopped, immediately shifting her attention to the little horn-shaped amulet around my neck. Worry lines carved

a deep path around her eyes and mouth. "Did you see if she was wearing her *cornicello*, Emilia?"

I didn't bother responding. We never took our amulets off, not even while bathing. My sister broke every rule except that one. Especially after what happened when we were eight... I briefly closed my eyes, willing the memory away. Nonna still didn't know about the *luccicare* I could see shimmering around humans while holding my amulet, and I hoped she never would.

"Mamma, please." My mother raised her gaze to the ceiling as if the goddess of sky might send an answer to her prayers in the form of a lightning bolt. I wasn't sure if the bolt was meant for Nonna, or my mother. "Let's get through dinner service before worrying about the Wicked. We have more pressing problems at the moment." She nodded to the sauté pan. "The garlic is starting to burn."

Nonna mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like "*So will their souls in Hell if we don't save them, Nicoletta,*" and I bit my lip to keep from smiling.

"Something's terribly wrong, I feel it in my bones. If Vittoria isn't home soon, I'll go looking for her myself. The Malvagi won't dare to steal her soul around me." Nonna brought her cleaver down on an unsuspecting mackerel, its head flopping to the limestone floor.

I sighed. We could've used it to make fish stock. Nonna was *really* getting herself worked up. She was the one who'd taught us the value in using every part of an animal.

Bones, however, could only be used for stock, not spells. At least those were the rules for us di Carlos. *Le arti oscure* was strictly forbidden. I scooped the fish head into a bowl to give to the alley cats later, banishing thoughts of the dark arts.

I poured some chilled wine for Nonna, adding orange slices and sugared peels to sweeten it. In moments, condensation

bloomed like morning dew across the glass. It was mid-July in Palermo, which meant the air was stifling at night, even with our windows open, coaxing a breeze.

It was especially hot in the kitchen now, though during colder months I still wore my long hair up because of the soaring temperatures created by our oven fires.

Sea & Vine, the di Carlo family trattoria, was known across Sicily for our sinfully delicious food. Each evening our tables were crowded with hungry patrons, all waiting to dine on Nonna's recipes. Lines formed in the late afternoons, no matter the weather. Nonna said simple ingredients were her secret, along with a touch of magic. Both of those statements were true.

"Here, Nonna." We weren't supposed to use magic outside of our home, but I whispered a quick spell, and, using the condensation dripping onto the stone, slid the drink along the counter in front of her. She paused long enough in her worrying to sip the sweet red wine. My mother mouthed her thanks when my grandmother's back was turned, and I grinned.

I wasn't sure why Nonna was so agitated tonight. Over the last several weeks—starting around our eighteenth birthday—my twin missed quite a few dinner services, and had snuck in well past sunset, her bronze cheeks flushed and her dark eyes bright. There was something different about her. And I had a strong suspicion it was because of a certain young vendor in the market.

Domenico Nucci Junior.

I'd stolen a peek at her diary and had seen his name scribbled in the margins before guilt had overtaken me and I'd tucked it back under the floorboard where she'd hidden it. We still shared a room on the second floor of our small, crowded home, so thankfully she didn't notice my snooping.

"Vittoria is fine, Nonna." I handed her some fresh parsley to garnish the shrimp. "I told you she's been flirting with the Nucci boy who sells arancini for his family near the castle. I'm sure he's busy with all the pre-festival celebrations tonight. I bet she's passing out fried rice balls to everyone who's overindulged. They need something to soak up all that sacramental wine." I winked, but my grandmother's fear didn't abate. I set the rest of the parsley down and hugged her close. "No demon is stealing her soul, or eating her heart. I promise. She'll be here soon."

"One day I hope you'll take signs from the goddesses seriously, bambina."

Maybe one day. But I'd heard stories about red-eyed demon princes my whole life and hadn't met one yet. I wasn't too worried things would suddenly change now. Wherever the Wicked had gone, it seemed to be permanent. I feared them as much as I worried about dinosaurs suddenly returning from extinction to take over Palermo. I left Nonna to the scampi, and smiled as music filtered in between the sounds of knives chopping and spoons stirring. It was my favorite kind of symphony—one that allowed me to focus entirely on the joy of creation.

I inhaled the fragrant scent of garlic and butter.

Cooking was magic and music combined. The crack of shells, the hiss of pancetta hitting a hot pan, the metallic clang of a whisk beating the side of a bowl, even the rhythmic thwack of a cleaver against a wooden cutting board. I adored each part of being in a kitchen with my family. I couldn't imagine a more perfect way to spend an evening.

Sea & Vine was my future and it promised to be filled with love and light. Especially if I saved enough coin to purchase the building next door and expand our family business. I'd been

experimenting with new flavors from across Italy and wanted to create my own menu one day.

My mother hummed along while forming marzipan into fruit shapes. "He's a nice boy. Domenico. He'd make a good match for Vittoria. His mother is always pleasant."

Nonna tossed a flour-coated hand in the air, waving it around as if the idea of an engagement with a Nucci stunk worse than the streets of the nearby fish market. "Bah! She's too young to worry about marriage. And he's not Sicilian."

My mother and I both shook our heads. I had a feeling his Tuscan roots had little to do with Nonna's disapproval. If she had it her way, we'd live in our ancestral home—in our little quarter of Palermo—until our bones turned to dust. Nonna didn't believe anyone else could watch over us as well as she could. Especially a mere human boy. Domenico wasn't witch-born like my father, and therefore Nonna didn't think he could ever fully be trusted with our secret.

"He was born here. His mother is from here. I'm fairly certain that makes him Sicilian," I said. "Stop being grumpy. It doesn't suit someone as sweet as you."

She harrumphed, ignoring my blatant attempt to charm her. Stubborn as a mule, as my grandfather would've said. She picked up her carved wooden spoon and pointed it in my direction. "Sardines washed themselves onto the shore. Gulls didn't touch them. You know what that means? It means *they're* no fools. The devil's stirring the seas, and they'll have nothing to do with his offerings."

"Mamma," my mother groaned and set the almond paste down. "A boat carrying kerosene crashed into the rocks last night. The oil killed the fish, not the devil."

Nonna shot my mother a look that would sink lesser souls to

their knees. "You know as well as I do it's a sign the Malvagi have arrived, Nicoletta. They've come to collect. You've heard of the bodies. The timing matched what was foretold. Is that a coincidence, too?"

"Bodies?" My voice shot up several octaves. "What are you talking about?"

Nonna clamped her mouth shut. My mother whipped her head around, forgetting about the marzipan again. A look passed between them, so deep and meaningful that chills crept down my spine.

"What bodies?" I prodded. "What was foretold?"

Our restaurant was busier than normal while we prepared for the influx of people attending the festival tomorrow, and it had been days since I'd listened to gossip swirling around the marketplace. I hadn't heard anything about bodies.

My mother gave my grandmother a look that said *You started this, you finish it*, and went back to her candy shaping. Nonna settled onto a chair she kept near the window, clasping her wine tightly. A breeze lifted the oppressive heat. Her eyes fluttered shut, as if soaking it in. She looked exhausted. Whatever was happening, was bad.

"Nonna? Please. What happened?"

"Two girls were murdered last week. One in Sciacca. And one here. In Palermo."

Sciacca—a port town facing the Mediterranean Sea—was almost directly south of us. It was a little jewel on an island filled with visual treasure. I couldn't imagine a murder there. Which was ridiculous since death didn't discriminate between paradise and hell.

"That's awful." I set my knife down, pulse pounding. I looked at my grandmother. "Were they... human?"

Nonna's sad look said it all. *Streghe*. I swallowed hard. No wonder she was carrying on about the Wicked returning. She was imagining one of us discarded in the streets, our souls being tortured by demons in Hell while our blood slipped through cracks in the stone, replenishing Earth's magic. I shuddered despite the sweat beading my brow. I didn't know what to make of the murders.

Nonna often chided me for being too skeptical, but I still wasn't convinced the Malvagi were to blame. Old legends claimed the Wicked were sent to make bargains and retrieve souls for the devil, not kill. And no one had seen them wandering our world in at least a hundred years.

Humans murdered each other all the time, though, and they definitely attacked us when they suspected what we were. Whispers of a new band of *strega* hunters reached us last week, but we'd seen no evidence of them. But now...if witches were being murdered, I was more inclined to believe human zealots were to blame. Which meant we needed to be even more careful to avoid discovery. No more simple charms where we could be seen. I tended to be overly cautious, but my sister was not. Her favorite form of hiding was not hiding at all.

Maybe Nonna was right to be worried.

"What did you mean about the Malvagi coming to collect?" I asked. "Or it being foretold?"

Nonna didn't look happy about my line of questioning, but saw the determination in my eyes and knew I'd keep asking. She sighed. "There are stories that claim the Wicked will return to Sicily every few weeks beginning now, searching for something that was stolen from the devil."

This was a new legend. "What was stolen?"

My mother stilled before shaping the marzipan again. Nonna

sipped her wine carefully, gazing into it as if she might divine the future in the pulp floating on the surface. "A blood debt."

I raised my brows. That didn't sound ominous at all. Before I could interrogate her further, someone rapped on the side door where we brought in supplies. Over the chatter in the small dining room, my father called to Uncle Nino to entertain the dinner guests. Footsteps thudded down the hall and the door creaked open.

"Buonasera, signore di Carlo. Is Emilia here?"

I recognized the deep voice and knew what he'd come to ask. There was only one reason Antonio Vicenzu Bernardo, the most newly appointed member of the holy brotherhood, ever called on me here. The nearby monastery relied heavily on donations and charity, so once or twice a month I made dinner for them on behalf of our family restaurant.

Nonna was already shaking her head as I wiped my hands on a towel and set my apron on the island. I smoothed down the front of my dark skirts, cringing a little at the flour splattered across my bodice. I looked like a queen of ash and probably stank like garlic.

I swallowed a sigh. Eighteen and romantically doomed forever.

"Emilia . . . please."

"Nonna, there are already plenty of people in the streets celebrating before the festival tomorrow. I promise I'll stick to the main road, make dinner quickly, and grab Vittoria on the way back. We'll both be home before you know it."

"No." Nonna was out of her chair, ushering me back like a wayward hen toward the island and my abandoned cutting board. "You mustn't leave here, Emilia. Not tonight." She clutched her own *cornicello*, her expression pleading. "Let someone else donate food instead, or you'll find yourself joining the dead in that monastery."

"Mamma!" my mother scolded. "What a thing to say!"

"Don't worry, Nonna," I said. "I don't plan on dying for a very, very long time."

I kissed my grandmother, then snatched a half-formed piece of marzipan from the plate my mother was working on and popped it into my mouth. While I chewed, I stuffed a basket with tomatoes, fresh basil, homemade mozzarella, garlic, olive oil, and a small bottle of thick balsamic Uncle Nino brought from his recent visit to Modena. It wasn't traditional, but I'd been experimenting and loved the flavor of vinegar lightly drizzled on top.

I added a jar of salt, a loaf of crusty bread we baked earlier, then quickly ducked out of the kitchen before I was wrangled into another argument.

I smiled warmly at Fratello Antonio, hoping he couldn't hear Nonna condemning him and the entire monastery in the background. He was young and handsome for a member of the brotherhood—just three years older than Vittoria and I. His eyes were the color of melted chocolate, and his lips always hinted at the sweetest smile. He'd grown up next door to us, and I used to dream about marrying him one day. Too bad he'd devoted himself to chastity; I was certain half the Kingdom of Italy wouldn't mind kissing his full mouth. Myself included.

"Buonasera, Fratello Antonio." I held my basket of supplies aloft, ignoring how odd it felt to call him "brother" when I had some *very* un-sisterly thoughts about him. "I've been experimenting again and am making a sort of a caprese-bruschetta combination for the brotherhood tonight. Does that sound all right?"

For his sake, I hoped so. It was quick and easy, and though the bread tasted better brushed with olive oil and lightly grilled, it didn't require a fire to make.

"It sounds heavenly, Emilia. And please, Antonio is fine. No need for old friends to stand on ceremony." He gave me a shy nod. "Your hair looks lovely."

"Grazie." I reached up and brushed my fingers against a flower. When we were younger, I began weaving orange blossoms and plumeria in my hair to set my twin and I apart. I reminded myself Antonio was involved with the Almighty Lord now and wasn't flirting with me.

No matter how much I sometimes wished otherwise.

While he studiously ignored the tinny sound of a pot hitting the stone floor, I internally cringed. I could only imagine what Nonna might toss next.

"Most of the brotherhood won't return to the monastery until later," he said, "but I can help, if you'd like."

Nonna's hysterics grew louder. He was polite enough to pretend he didn't hear her dire warnings of demons killing young women in Sicily and stealing their souls. I gave him my most winning smile, hoping it didn't look like a grimace. "I'd like that very much."

His attention slid behind me as Nonna's cries reached us, a tiny crease forming in his brow. Normally she was careful around customers, but if she started screaming about the dark arts and protection charms where he could overhear her, our bustling family restaurant would be ruined.

If there was one thing humans feared as much as the Malvagi, it was witches.



## TWO

**When we entered** the monastery, I wasn't thinking about the devil. Or the wicked, soul-snatching demons Nonna swore were roaming the earth again. And while Antonio was undeniably pleasant to look at, I wasn't distracted by the slight curve of his mouth. Or the flop of brown hair that fell across his brow whenever he glanced at me then quickly looked away.

Of all things, I was thinking about olive oil.

For some reason the corridor smelled faintly of burnt thyme, which made me wonder what thyme-infused olive oil might taste like lightly brushed across crostini. I started daydreaming about my own restaurant again—about the menu I'd perfect. The crostini would make a fantastic antipasto. I'd top the toast off with some sliced mushrooms sautéed with a pad of butter, garlic, and a splash of white wine. Maybe I'd even sprinkle a bit of pecorino and parsley to round out the flavors...

We entered the room where kitchen supplies were kept, and I tucked those thoughts into my mental recipe folder and focused on the task at hand. I removed two cutting boards and a large bowl from the cupboard, and laid everything out on the tiny table.

"I'll dice the tomatoes, you cube the mozzarella."

"As you command, signorina." We both reached inside the basket I'd brought and Antonio's fingers brushed mine. I quickly yanked the tomatoes out and pretended a little thrill hadn't shot through me at the unexpected contact.

Cooking alone with Antonio—in a darkened chamber in a near-forgotten section of the building—was not a bad way to pass the time. If he hadn't turned his life over to the lord, this might have been the beginning of something between us.

Now, unbeknownst to him, we were enemies.

He belonged to the church and I was a witch. And not just a human *strega* using folk magic against the evil eye and praying to Catholic saints. My family was something other, something not entirely human. Our power was feared, not respected. Along with twelve other witch families living secretly in Palermo, we were true Daughters of the Moon. Descendants of an actual goddess. There were more families scattered across the island, but for everyone's safety, we didn't interact with each other.

Our magic was a peculiar thing. While it only passed down the matriarchal line, it didn't manifest in *all* women. My witch-born mother didn't possess any supernatural abilities. Unless her baking could be counted, which I fully believed it could. Only someone goddess-blessed could craft desserts the way my mother did.

At one time there'd been a council made up of the eldest member of each witch family. Nonna had been the leader in Palermo, but the coven disbanded soon after Vittoria and I were born. Stories were a little murky on the exact cause of the coven's collapse, but from what I'd gathered, old Sofia Santorini had invoked the dark arts and something went very wrong, leaving her mind fragmented. Some said she used a human skull during a scrying

session. Others claimed it was a black mirror. All agreed on the end result: her mind was now trapped between realms.

Humans grew suspicious of what they deemed sudden madness. Whispers of the devil followed. Soon our world became too dangerous for real witches to meet, even secretly after that. So the thirteen families of Palermo adopted a strict code of silence and stuck to themselves.

Man had a funny way of blaming the devil for things he didn't like. It was strange that we were called evil when humans were the ones who enjoyed watching us burn.

"So aside from the demons invading our city, how are you?" Antonio didn't even try to hide his grin. "Good thing you've got a member of the holy brotherhood watching out for your trembling soul."

"You're terrible."

"True, but you don't really think so." His dark eyes glittered as I tossed a diced tomato at him, my face flaming. He dodged it with ease. "Or, at least I hope you don't."

"I'll never tell." I dropped my attention to the plump tomato I was dicing. Once, when we were younger, I'd used a truth spell on him to see if he'd returned my feelings. Much to my delight, he had and it felt like the world rejoiced with the discovery. When I told Nonna what I'd done, she made me scrub the kitchen from top to bottom by myself for a month.

It hadn't exactly been the reaction I'd expected.

Nonna said truth spells—while not explicitly part of the dark arts—should never be used on humans because they were part of *Il Proibito*. The Forbidden were few, but held severe consequences.

Free will was one of the most basic laws of nature in this world, beyond notions of light or dark magic, and should *never* be