

CHAPTER 1

August 1285

Bury Down, Cornwall

First light had yet to find its way through the dense alder canopy when I stepped into the copse to search for Brighida. I wanted to call out, but this little wood, now a place of death, felt sacred, so I whispered her name as I picked my way along its winding path.

“Here, Megge.” My cousin’s voice came to me from just around the next turn. I found her sitting on the ground shivering in her thin summer tunic. Mud caked her hair, dotted her face, and appeared to have been splashed over her arm, her hand, her nails. The still form of her mother lay on the ground beside her covered by Brighida’s cloak. My cousin leaned over and tucked a loose edge of it under her mother’s hip.

“Brighida . . .” I dropped my stick and the bundle I carried, took off my cloak, and wrapped it around her.

“What happened here?” I wrapped my arms around her to stop her trembling, then touched her cheek to brush away a speck of mud. I rubbed it between my finger and thumb. That wasn’t mud. I touched the hood that covered Claris’s face. Black and sticky, it felt as if someone had soaked it in tar.

“Brighida.” A chill crawled up my spine. “What happened here?”

She stared into the trees, her eyes dull. “We were on our way home. We had sold all the fleece and were talking about the things we could buy. ‘A horse,’ Mother had said. ‘Perhaps a cart.’ And then he—” She looked at me now with the eyes of a child awakening from a nightmare.

“The imposter abbot—” she lifted her arm as if pulling a great cowl over her head. “The blacksmith, Michael Gough. He stepped out from between the trees, put an arm around her neck and jerked it, then dropped her to the ground.

“He said something to me . . .” She seemed to search my eyes for the memory, but then gave up. “I just stood there staring. I, a seer of Bury Down, had seen—could see—nothing.”

She still hadn’t blinked.

“Brighida?”

“It was dark when it happened. We had stayed in the village too long.” She looked with sorrow at her mother. Then, as if seeking comfort, looked back up at me. “Tell me, Megge, did you feel it when her spirit left her? Did you know? Is that how you knew to come for me?”

I shook my head. “I knew only after the Mentors had welcomed her into the ether.” *After I had spoken my vow*, I thought but did not say. We would talk of that later. “A vision came to me. Of you . . . here . . . with her.”

I reached out to touch bluish fingertips visible at the edge of that sodden cloak.

“Leave her, Megge.” She tucked them under the cloak.

“But why? Why can I not see her?”

“Go.” Though her voice was firm, her heavy-lidded eyes, pink-rimmed and shot with red, betrayed her fatigue. “I will tend to my mother.” She wiped her nose on her sleeve. “You’ll help

me . . . later . . . put her to rest in the grove. But for now, I must be the one to care for her. You couldn't possibly understand. But you must go."

"Already I've sent Alf for Martyn and Hugh. They'll be here soon with the cart. Can't I wait with you?"

She shook her head. "You'll be tired, Megge. A vowtaking is a serious matter. You'll not have slept."

"You knew?"

She smiled as gently as her mother might have. "Of course I knew. I was with you in spirit."

"Why, then, will you not let me see her?"

I too am now a woman of Bury Down, I thought, wanting to pull out my hair. Why can I still not see my cousin's heart or read her thoughts as she can mine?

"They'll be here soon, Megge. Please. Go back to the cottage. Prepare a place for her in the workroom. That long table—"

"The table is ready."

"Please, Megge." She was weeping now, the sound so strange that I realized I had rarely heard her cry. Not when her legs had been burned and her arm destroyed, nor when Morwen and Aleydis had died, nor even when my mother had been killed. Had she wept alone? Had my own grief kept me from noticing hers?

But I saw it now. And I knew that, at that moment, Brighida was not the seer of Bury Down. She was just a girl who had lost her mother. She was seeing only the horror that had befallen them both, something so awful she had to hide it even from me. But who else could help her now? She had no one left but me.

I leaned forward and touched my fingertips to the hood covering Claris's face. What had that monster done to my beautiful aunt? Rage bubbled in my chest and burned my throat. I swallowed it and spoke quietly, as Claris herself might have done.

"Please, Brighida. Let me help you. Let me help *her*."

Her weeping quieted, and finally she nodded, not turning away as I drew back the hood that covered her mother's face.

Slashed from earlobe to collar bone, the left side of Claris's neck gaped. Blood crusted her hair and pooled around her, staining the ground purple-black.

I threw the hood back over her face and vomited into the bushes, squeezing my eyes shut and trying to purge from my mind that hideous sight.

"He came out of the woods. We never heard him." Brighida looked at her mother's covered form as if seeking confirmation. "It was dark, and I didn't see all he had done, but I believed he would kill me too. Instead, he quickly knelt and put his hand to her neck. He snarled at me, 'Daughter of a whore.' Then he wiped his hands in the grass and got up. He stoppered a small clay vial and slipped it into his pocket.

"I knelt beside my mother. It was only then that I saw the blood. He must have . . . cut her . . . as he broke her neck." She looked away from Claris. "It was so fast, Megge."

"He took her blood?" I asked.

Brighida nodded. "He kept coughing. And his voice was so rough. He said—" Wincing, she looked away. "He called me—oh, Megge, the look he gave me. I thought he was going to slit my throat too. But he said . . . what he said . . . and then he ran into the woods. I heard him ride off on a horse. He was gone."

"What did he say?"

As if she had not heard, she mused aloud, “Why would he, a blacksmith, want her blood?” She looked up as if something had just occurred to her. “Some healers use blood in their remedies. Conjurers use it in their spells. And there are rites. Ancient rites. Ceremonies. Lore. Legend . . . but they’ve naught to do with us.” She rubbed her eyebrow. “But Michael Gough is neither conjurer nor healer.” She drew in a hissing breath. “That mother of his dabbled in charms. She hated my mother. Called her a whore. *He* called her a whore.”

She was pacing, and I was unable to understand her raving.

“Brighida.” I clapped my hands on her shoulders. “You said he called *you* something.”

She looked at me as if trying to understand what I was asking.

“You said Michael Gough called you something. What did he call you?”

The chains on Hugh’s cart rattled and its wheels groaned in the distance. Brighida slipped out of my grasp and knelt beside her mother, then leaned forward and rested her cheek on Claris’s cloaked face.

Stepping carefully so as not to disturb her final intimate moment with her mother by breaking twigs or crunching dry leaves, I made my way to the path and waved. Hugh drew back on the reins and halted the cart. I pointed at Brighida, and he nodded and then sat back to wait.

Martyn jumped down and put an arm around my shoulders. So many things he could have said; but standing so close, such a comfort, he needed not speak. And we too waited.

When Brighida finally looked up, Hugh went to her. As he helped her to her feet, she looked down once more at her mother before stumbling away. I took her hand to lead her to the front of the cart, but she shook her head and instead climbed into the back.

“Martyn—” I pointed to the bundle and the jug I had left on the ground and motioned with my head for him to bring it to me.

I lifted the jug to Brighida's lips. "Drink."

When she had taken a swallow, I set down the jug and tore off a piece of bread and handed it to her. She wiped her blood-stained hand on an empty woolsack and took it. As she ate, I wondered why Michael Gough had taken Claris's blood. What he had said to Brighida. And why he had spared her.