

Chapter One

On a warm spring day, when the sky overhead was a brilliant cobalt blue, and the bees hummed in the first dandelion heads, and the air smelled of fresh grass and new beginnings, I killed every last person in the village of Anlow.

It was an accident. I suppose most murderers say exactly the same thing, because that's what I was: a murderer. It didn't matter that I hadn't meant to do it; what mattered was the bodies lying in the streets and the fields, their faces blackened, eyes blank and staring, forever bereft of the life stolen from them in single, blazing moment of anger.

Like every family in the district, we were in Anlow for the Spring Ceremony. My family had no seventeen-year-old boys to offer up their tithes of magic. But we still attended the Ceremony, to see the sheepdogs on display, and the finest rams paraded in front of critical farmers' eyes, and the cakes and pastries sold at stalls manned by cheerful farmers' wives.

And that was where it happened. Local boys were teasing Nera after she dropped her iced cake on the muddy ground. She stared at the fallen cake and began to wail.

"What an imbecile!" one boy shouted with a laugh.

"Retard!" another said.

"Look, she's seventeen and she doesn't even understand what we're saying," a third said, pointing at my sister's blank expression as she gaped at them, mouth open.

A farmer's wife turned to the woman next to her. "What a crying shame."

"Shouldn't have been born," said her companion. "Let's hope she dies young. She's nothing more than a burden to her family."

A tremendous surge of rage threatened to explode from somewhere inside my chest. For a single, blazing instant, I hoped that everyone *here* would die young.

Farah, my older sister, ran forward to grab Nera by the arm. "Come, let's go find Mama," she said, and brushed away Nera's tears. "Would you like to see the toy tent? Mama said she'd wait for us there."

Nera forgot all about her lost cake and nodded, letting Farah lead her through the crowds. I followed them, stumbling a moment as a wave of unexpected dizziness hit me.

Half an hour later, we were in the toy tent with Mama when the woman next to her collapsed, her face contorted into an expression of horror, her skin turning black before our eyes. For a moment the people around us stared at the woman, stunned, and then others began to fall to the ground. Screams erupted around us.

"Outside!" my mother ordered. We stumbled out of the tent, stepping over the bodies and into the bright spring sunlight. But it was the same in the field: people were putting hands to their mouths, swaying and crumpling into the dirt. I glanced at the blackened face of one woman, lying sprawled, face-up on the muddy ground. Her expression was fixed into an awful grimace.

We found my father over by the sheepdog display. By that time, few people were left standing. Those who were still upright were falling over like daisies buffeted in the

wind, some of them crawling in the mud, coughing violently. We piled into our cart, panicked, and my father set a furious pace for home.

My family were silent on the drive back to our farm. Only Nera was oblivious to what had happened, cradling the wooden doll that Mama had bought her and crooning in delight. But my mother glanced at me frequently, an expression on her face that I'd never seen before.

It was fear.

The next morning, my father met the carter on the main road and convinced him to take me with him on his return journey to Aubergen.

My family were relieved to see me go. It was all too obvious. My father gruffly patted me on the shoulder with the same tentative hesitancy as a lamb sniffing a human for the first time, worried that if it made a wrong move something disastrous would happen. My two sisters hung back, Farah restraining Nera. At the last moment Nera darted forward and flung her arms around my waist. She, of all of them, didn't understand what was happening, but even she knew that something was wrong. Farah called her away sharply. I heard the fear in my older sister's voice, saw that she refused to meet my eyes.

Only my mother shed a tear as she embraced me. "It's for the best, Joulla," she said, swallowing.

The haunted eyes of my family staring at me as the cart made its way down the track leading away from our farm, past the green heads of wheat nodding gently in the warm spring breeze, would stay with me forever. I'd hoped, as I sat there in the cart, that one of them would shout that it had all been a mistake, that I should come

home, that there was no need to go to Aubergen after all. But no one called out. They'd seen the swollen, blackened bodies, the grim faces of our friends and neighbours twisted into grotesque expressions, dried spittle on their lips. And they knew that it was my fault.

Thoughts rolled through my head with the same rhythm as the steady *clack clack clack* of the wooden cart wheels churning along the dirt road to Aubergen. *I killed the entire district. I killed the entire district.* There was little to interrupt my grim inner monologue besides the occasional cry of an eagle soaring far above. Crickets hummed in the heads of grass. The sun was warm on my head. In the distance ewes *baa*-ed to their lambs. The wind carried the warm dust of mid-spring and the heavy, dusky scent of dandelions.

Something had to be done about me—I knew that as well as anyone. As it was, word was sure to spread that only one family in the district had survived. Blue Cloaks would be swarming the village within days, sniffing around for any signs of magic. Women don't do magic, they would declare, and they would haul me away. If only I'd been born a boy, folks would say—well, would have said, if there had been anyone left.

Better, my father had said, a grim expression on his weathered face, that I go to Uncle Ben and Aunt Loris in Aubergen. Uncle Ben was a mage. Uncle Ben would cure me.

I knew the road to Aubergen like I knew every corner of my own farm. Every tree was familiar, every bend in the road in the six-hour journey like an old friend. But as the cart rolled steadily past emerald fields of rye and wheat and copses of acacia trees, their sap fragrant in the

warm air, I stared at those familiar features like they were foreign, as my family had stared at me.

It was fortunate that the cart driver, who had brought in the weekly delivery of goods for the village, was silent. He would probably talk soon enough, but not to me, telling whoever would listen in Aubergen that the entire village of Anlow was filled with the stench of rotting corpses, and the only living person waiting for him had been my father with the odd request to carry his daughter back to Aubergen.

And so I was left to my own thoughts, as the cart wound its way through the gentle foothills of Tambria. The hours passed, and the sun burned my arms. Birds darted overhead. An occasional hare dashed across the road in front of the cart. The land turned greener, and we passed fewer fields of grain and more sloping fields of baby cabbages and corn. My thoughts turned darker.

I'd known everyone who died, grown up with them. My friends, the neighbours' children, had lain sprawled on the ground among the blackened faces. My stomach lurched at that thought, as it had with anger only yesterday. I couldn't even pretend that the deaths were a horrible coincidence. This had happened twice before. Last year, foxes had broken into our henhouse and killed my hens. The next day, my father had found the rotting bodies of dozens of foxes, lying scattered throughout our wheat fields as though some pestilence had killed them all at once. Their faces were blackened and twisted into grotesque expressions.

And a few months ago, our neighbour Elva had turned up at our farmhouse, her face bruised and bleeding. My mother had ushered her inside and offered her some tea. I

never knew what they talked about—my mother had very firmly shut the door of the sitting room when I'd tried to linger and listen. After old Tully had arrived several hours later with his horse and cart, demanding that Elva return home with him, she had silently climbed into the cart, her face wooden. I stood with my mother watching the cart disappear down the drive, Tully's arm firmly grasping Elva's shoulder.

"If it were up to me, men who beat their wives would be locked away for good," my mother had said, lips pursed.

"He did that to her?" I said incredulously, remembering Elva's bleeding nose and black eye.

She nodded.

"Then he should be cursed," I said, something blazing deep in my chest.

The next day, all of farmer Tully's sheep were dead. Their bodies were swollen and blackened, dried spittle around their mouths. And Tully himself fell violently ill, some sort of stomach complaint. My mother had looked at me when my father told us over dinner, her gaze quizzical. But she had said nothing.

Foxes and sheep were one thing. Every human in Anlow and its surrounds was another. Three times in a year wasn't a coincidence. It was magic.

Again, my stomach lurched, this time with self-loathing. What had I done? *What had I done?* I didn't deserve to be helped—I deserved to be executed for using magic, for killing the people I'd known my entire life by accident. If ever there was proof of why women shouldn't use magic, I was it. There was a word for women like me, and it wasn't a nice one: *witch*.

My thoughts wound round and round, repeating the same scenes and words over and over in a bitter diatribe of internal condemnation that refused to cease as the cart drew closer to Aubergen. We passed the little stone stele with its etched inscriptions that marked the last half an hour of the journey. Beyond the stele, the fields changed to crops of lupins and peas. The farmhouses dotting the land along the roadside became more and more frequent.

At last, the cart topped a rise and began to descend. The murky brown waters of the River Astelle wound through the valley below and through the streets of the town. A stone wall curved around the town and reached all the way up to the summit of the smaller of the two hills, where the Blue Cloak barracks stood with its crisp blue pennants snapping in the breeze. A sandstone castle overlooked the town from the other, taller peak across the other side of the valley, where Lord Dom, the warden of the town, and his family lived.

I came here every year in Midsummer with my father to sell our wool and our wheat. The barges moored to the pilings on the riverfront carried the wheat downriver to the east, where the great flour mills of Lyre ground it into flour and shipped it to Paladel's major seaports.

It was never difficult to find a buyer for our wheat. We were known for having the finest grain in the province of Tambria. Our crops never failed, never had pestilence. We had never used the services of a Brown Cloak mage to control blight or improve the quality of our crops. Our wheat was perfect, and people said as much.

Once the deal was closed, my father would arrange for a carter to come from Aubergen to our farm to pick up the harvest in whole. Then we would wander in search of

sweet ice, attend Lord Dom's Midsummer Festival address, and visit Uncle Ben and Aunt Loris. That was what I associated Aubergen with: the Midsummer Festival, sweet ice, and my aunt and uncle.

The cart joined the main paved stone road leading down into the valley, clattering across the stone bridge, past the four o'clock bushes that lined the muddy banks of the river. The apple trees lining the main street were still resplendent with pale pink spring blossoms, as fine as pink snow. Other carts laden with early produce weaved their way along the same route as us, their drivers bellowing at children and dogs to get out of the way.

The carter pulled his horse to a stop outside a building with a plain white sign set above it, indicating that the house's occupant was a White Cloak and his ranking was magician.

Uncle Ben had explained the difference to me once, because for us common folk the term 'mage' meant everyone who practised magic. Magicians, he said, were those who had only taken an apprenticeship with a master, who wore grey cloaks with their hoods indicating the colour of their order. Mages had studied at the University in Cadeira and wore coloured capes attached to their grey cloaks. Sorcerers, the highest of all magical rankings, had performed some great quest or created a new spell. They wore the full-coloured robes of their order. Uncle Ben would never have been able to afford a University education, and his magic wasn't strong enough for him to be chosen to attend the University as a scholarship student, but a local White Cloak had taken pity on him when he was young and taken him as his apprentice.

I dismounted, thanked the carter and gave him a coin for his trouble. Then, drawing a breath to steel myself, I walked up the step and pulled at the string to jangle the doorbell hanging over the door.

After several seconds, my aunt opened the door.

“Joulla!” she exclaimed, her broad face widening into a welcoming smile. She called over her shoulder, “Ben, it’s Joulla!” She turned back to me. “Well, this is a nice surprise. Where’s your father?”

“Not here,” I said. Tears welled up in my eyes.

Her look immediately became sympathetic. “Come inside, sweet, and tell us all about it.”

I followed her down the hallway and into the kitchen with its lace curtains and blue tiles. Uncle Ben welcomed me with warm words from where he was seated at the kitchen table. He was tall and skinny like my father, with iron-grey hair thinning around the edges and a salt and pepper moustache. Aunt Loris was a contrast to him: large and round and warm, rather like a fresh loaf of the white bread that she was so fond of.

I sat at the table and politely accepted a cup of tea. Aunt Loris pushed a plate of scones in front of me. She began to talk about the Spring Festival and how Uncle Ben had treated a dozen young men who had drunk too much, and several people had ended up with heatstroke, oh and Lord Dom and Lady Catia were back after a month in Cadeira. I picked at a scone and tried to look interested.

When there was a break in conversation, Uncle Ben turned to me.

“Why don’t you tell us what’s brought you to Aubergen by yourself,” he said in his quiet voice.

I drew a breath. "I'm here because Father thought you might be able to help me."

"Are you unwell?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, my voice breaking. I put down the scone and swallowed down the lump in my throat. "I—I think I used magic. By accident. Everyone in Anlow is dead because of me."

"You can't have used magic," Aunt Loris said. "Women don't have any magic."

"But they all died except us," I croaked. "Every single person in Anlow there for the festivities. And I felt it go out of me, the magic."

"Tell us what happened, from the beginning," Uncle Ben said.

And so I told them. I cried as the words poured forth, wiping my eyes with one of Aunt Loris's hankies, because in the retelling it became real, final, in a way that it hadn't before. Uncle Ben sat silently, and even Aunt Loris said little besides an occasional sympathetic murmur. When I had finished, and wiped my eyes one last time, Uncle Ben leaned back in his chair, his forehead furrowed.

"But women don't have any magic," Aunt Loris said again, as though trying to convince herself more than me.

"Some do," Uncle Ben said unexpectedly.

"You mean witches?" Aunt Loris said. "But they just use herbs, commune with spirits. They don't draw on real magic. Women can't."

Uncle Ben shook his head. "I've heard of a few isolated cases, here and there. A White Cloak over in Lyre once told me he treated a girl who tried to summon a hail storm in the middle of a heatwave. The girl almost

died—exhausted herself in the process, for weather magic is an impossible magic to wield to begin with. And a few years back I heard of a case up in Camberlay, a young servant woman who'd been abused by her master. Word was she went mad and killed the entire household using magic."

"What happened to her?" I asked, a hollow feeling in my stomach.

"She was arrested by the Blue Cloaks and executed the next day."

My heart leaped in fear.

"*Ben*," Aunt Loris said firmly, seeing my expression.

"That's not going to happen to our Joulla."

"No, of course not," he said. "Joulla's hardly mad."

"Well, anyway, even if some women are born with magic, it's not proper for women to use it. We don't have the temperament for it." Aunt Loris quoted the words that I'd grown up with, heard from my father and mother: "Boys don't cry; girls don't spell."

"Some boys cry," Uncle Ben said mildly.

"And their parents should know better than to encourage it," Aunt Loris said in a sharp tone. "That's not the way things are supposed to be."

"Can you help me?" I asked Uncle Ben.

He regarded me several moments, thinking. "There are herbs that us practitioners of magic are told to avoid in combination. Woodthistle, chamomile, dandelion and so on. We could make a concoction of sorts to treat you, but it would take some trial and error."

"Then Joulla will stay with us until she's cured," Aunt Loris said in a decided tone, "and perhaps even longer." Her eyes gleamed momentarily. "It will be good to have

you around—we've been overwhelmed with patients of late, and could do with an extra pair of hands. How old are you now, Joulla?"

"Eighteen," I said, twisting the hanky in my hands.

"And not yet married?"

"Father hasn't rushed any of us," I said, swallowing. "Farah started walking out with one of the young farmers over Watlyn Marsh way last year. I suppose I'll be next."

"You could do much better than a farmer," Aunt Loris said, eying me up as though I was a lamb on display in a sheep pen. "You've got exactly the features that bring the mages from Cadeira to Aubergen, doesn't she, Ben?"

"What?" he said absently, forehead still furrowed.

"Everyone knows the mages come here for the Midsummer festival just to find a sweet, brown-eyed Tambrian girl," Aunt Loris said. "Lacey was just telling me the other day that she sent her youngest girl off to deportment lessons up in the castle with Lord Dom's wife. Said Lady Catia knows exactly what the magefolk are looking for, being Cadeiran herself. Anyway, next thing Lacey knew, her girl was betrothed to a magician in the garrison. And her girl is quite ordinary, Joulla, compared to you. With your looks, you could get yourself a real, proper mage from a noble family and wind up in Cadeira."

I blinked. Aunt Loris's chatter was so commonplace that it felt discordant after the violent events of the last few days.

"It's very kind of you to think of me, Aunt Loris," I said carefully, "but I don't really want to leave the farm."

"Then we'll find you someone here," she said, not to be dissuaded. "Leydon, the White Cloak up in the castle,

hasn't married yet despite a steady stream of hopeful girls, and he's very talented. And there are the mages in the garrison; you could do very well for yourself."

"Joulla would hardly be a suitable match for a Blue Cloak, Loris," Uncle Ben said reprovingly. "She should be avoiding them if she does indeed have magic. Word's sure to get out about what happened in Anlow."

"She'll be fine once she's had a good dose of those herbs," Aunt Loris said dismissively. "And they won't suspect a sweet thing like her could have had anything to do with a pestilence like that. Anyway, once you're feeling better, we'll talk to Lacey and arrange for your Uncle Ben to make some introductions."

"It's just as well we haven't any daughters of our own," Uncle Ben said with a grimace. "You'd have them married off to any old passing sorcerer. No, best you avoid the mages in the town for now, Joulla, until we fix whatever's wrong with you."

"I'd much rather just go back to our farm when all this is over, if that's alright," I said.

"And that you will," Uncle Ben said.

"We can talk more about it once you're feeling better," Aunt Loris said. "Why don't you put your things in the loft upstairs? You can help lay the table for dinner once you're done, if you like."

Feeling more relieved than I had in days, I thanked them and made my way upstairs. I wasn't a monster – this had happened to other girls. Uncle Ben could cure me. It wouldn't happen again.

Chapter Two

Despite my initial feeling of relief, I fell into an increasingly deep melancholy over the next few days, numbing me to every emotion except a sort of dull despair, even as I went about the tasks that Uncle Ben and Aunt Loris set me. I went to the early morning markets to buy dried herbs for Uncle Ben's potion, and to the baker's with Aunt Loris to exchange gossip and buy bread—not the rough stuff that we made at home, grinding our own wheat, but soft, sweet, white bread that, had I been feeling myself, I would have eaten with relish. It was Aunt Loris's way of trying to make me feel better, but everything tasted bland, such was my feeling of hopelessness.

Aunt Loris even invited her friend Lacey and her daughter over for tea, in the hope, I suspect, of me making friends. I sat in the parlour, pouring tea, barely taking in the small talk as they discussed the price of eggs, the illness of Lord Dom's youngest son, and the woman's daughter who, I gathered, was betrothed to one of the magicians in the Blue Cloak garrison.

"Isn't that wonderful," Aunt Loris said to me brightly, almost dropping her scone topped with jam and cream as she turned to me in exuberance. "I'm sure you and Amley have a lot in common."

I looked at the blond-haired girl with her perfectly-made up face, frilled yellow dress, and slender, white hands, and doubted it. I'd grown up on a farm, helping birth lambs, spinning wool and bundling wheat. Amley was probably a very nice girl, but I couldn't find the energy to try to be friendly. And I didn't want to ask her

how she had come to be betrothed to a mage, which was what Aunt Loris so obviously hoped.

Almost as though she'd heard my thoughts, the girl gave me a superior look and sniffed.

And so, Aunt Loris's friend and her daughter departed, seemingly unaware of Aunt Loris's ulterior motives for asking them over to tea. I avoided Aunt Loris as much as I could after that, pretending to be oblivious to her disappointed looks and pointed remarks about the benefits of marriage to a mage.

Life was dull and dreary and heavy. I walked around in a daze, barely aware of questions from my aunt and uncle, mechanically assisting Aunt Loris in the kitchen and Uncle Ben with his steady stream of patients. The sun outside was bright and the spring air brought the promise of new life, but inside me there was only a grey emptiness and the memory of blackened faces.

Four days after my arrival, I woke early to the sound of someone banging downstairs on the front door.

"Ho! Anyone home?" a man shouted.

The light was white-grey, indicating dawn was near, and the air was chilly. I wrapped a shawl around my shoulders and made my way downstairs to find Uncle Ben talking with the man on the doorstep.

"Joulla, fetch my herb bag, would you?" Uncle Ben said to me, his face grim. "I could use your help with this case."

It was a woman in labour, a few streets down in a dirty hut that seemed little more than a ramshackle collection of materials thrown together at random. Uncle Ben immediately took charge and ordered the hysterical relatives out of the room. His expression was grave as he

put a hand to the woman's forehead and her abdomen. I silently passed him his herbs and boiled water for him over the fire, while he used his magic and ground together the herbs to make the delivery as smooth as possible. But the woman's face was white, her breath was shallow, and the baby had no heartbeat.

We were too late for both of them. If they'd come to Uncle Ben weeks ago he could have intervened, but they'd had no money. As it was, Uncle Ben said, the woman's husband wouldn't be able to afford his fees for our work this morning.

By the time the sun outside had reached its zenith, the woman's struggle was over. Uncle Ben cleaned the lifeless, pale bodies of the woman and the infant as best he could, while the woman's husband and daughters wept in the next room.

Then I gathered up Uncle Ben's herbs. As I swept them into the herb bag, I glanced at the woman's lifeless form next to me, remembering the blackened, grotesque bodies in the streets of Anlow not a week ago.

Death was following me.

Uncle Ben paused in his work, almost as though he had sensed my thoughts. "Why don't you go on home, Joulla?" he said. "I won't be too much longer here."

I nodded and stumbled outside, blinking in the bright, noon-day sunlight.

It was odd that life went on, unconcerned, in the face of death. Carts rolled past, piled high with heaps of carrots and the first apples. Dogs barked at each other. People chatted unconcerned with their neighbours, and children ran barefoot through the streets. The blue sky overhead

was broken only occasionally by a wisp of cloud driven by the brisk breeze.

I walked through the streets of Aubergen not knowing where I was going. Aimlessly, I wandered past the statue of the Lady of Tambria at the wishing well, where I'd thrown pennies as a young girl and made wishes. The market square beyond was empty, scraps of leftover vegetable leaves the only sign of this morning's market. Further uphill the road branched into two, the path to the right leading to the crypts deep in the hillside, where we had buried my grandmother a few years ago. I veered away from that path—I didn't want to court even more death today.

Without even knowing why, I found myself at the top of the town wall, wind buffeting me, looking down at the muddy waters of the river far below. My eyes moved to the green hills to the southeast that stretched all the way to Cadeira. Somewhere behind those hills lay our farm and, somewhere beyond that, a little village empty of life.

My gaze returned to the river.

It would be easy enough to jump. No one was around to stop me. I wouldn't be able to hurt anyone else, wouldn't burden my family with the fear that I'd inflict more death and disaster. I wouldn't have to feel any more. The regret, the self-recrimination would no longer have a dark hold on my heart, and I'd be at peace.

I stared at the murky waters of the Astelle so long that my eyes hurt.

An eagle screeched overhead, bringing me to the present. I blinked and stepped away from the edge, my heart pounding. Of course I wouldn't jump—my poor

uncle and aunt would have to deal with my broken body and explain to their neighbours why their niece had thrown herself to her death. My mother and father had enough worries with Nera and the upcoming harvest, without adding my death to the mix.

I stumbled away from the parapet, down through the streets again, barely taking in my surroundings. What had I been thinking? I needed to get home, offer to help Aunt Loris with something before my thoughts carried me to a place from which there was no escape. I passed the statue of the Lady of Tambria and came to the apple trees in the lower part of town, my heart thudding heavily in my ears. *Stupid, stupid.*

"Got yourself a man, sweetheart?" a male voice said.

I spun around, my cheeks flaming, searching the nearby faces to identify the person who had uttered those insulting words.

A squadron of about eight or nine Blue Cloaks were leaning against the nearest wall, eyeing up the women who passed. They were exchanging grins, very obviously showing off. Several eyed me suggestively.

I'd seen this before in the village, the way entire groups had ganged up on Nera, called her the village fool as she stared at them vacantly, mouth open. People could be so cruel. I felt a surge of anger. How dare these Blue Cloaks, tasked with protecting the population, take advantage of girls who they knew would blush demurely and keep on walking?

One of them whistled behind me. I wheeled around again, unsure who it had been, and focused on the Blue Cloak standing closest to me. He was strikingly ugly, with copper-red hair and a crooked nose, the blue cape of

his cloak indicating his senior ranking. He was smirking, and that was to his detriment. My eyes blazed as I focused on him.

His grin contorted into an expression of horror. The next moment he was kneeling in the dirt, retching violently. Several of his fellows laughed.

I walked away. He'd be ill for a few hours. Hopefully that would teach him.

The encounter with the Blue Cloaks, at least, had helped me to feel again, to focus on something besides my own despair. I walked the short distance home feeling lighter than I had in days.

Aunt Loris fussed over me when I arrived, asking where I had been, and ordered me to lay the plates for dinner, for somehow it was late afternoon already. What had happened, and what had I spent the afternoon doing?

I answered her questions as I ladled the stew into bowls, taking comfort in the simple routine of preparing dinner. Uncle Ben joined us and we began to eat the warm mouthfuls of stew, the conversation turning, as it always did, to what the neighbours had done and said.

"There's a new falconer up in the castle," Aunt Loris said, spreading butter on her white bread. "Lady Catia apparently didn't like the old one. Rumour has it he was cruel to his birds, so they've appointed his apprentice. A strapping young man with considerable talent, if I do say so myself. Oh and Lacey mentioned that a party of Blue Cloaks arrived this afternoon from Cadeira and have taken lodging up in the castle—very important people, so she said."

"I've often wondered why we need a town watch, with the housewives of Aubergen doing such a fine job,"

Uncle Ben said, mopping up his stew with a piece of bread.

“There’s no need to be like that,” Aunt Loris said. “I happen to take an interest in the world around me. People and events are fascinating, if you have a mind for it.”

The front door bell rang, its tinny jingle making me jump.

Uncle Ben sighed and put down his fork, looking, for a moment, like an old, tired man. “The work of a White Cloak never ceases,” he said. That was the closest Uncle Ben would ever get to complaining.

The door creaked open when he reached it, and the sound of a murmured conversation filtered back to us in the kitchen.

“It’s far too late for him to be treating a patient, unless it’s an emergency,” Aunt Loris said. “But there are too many emergencies these days, Baladyn knows. Help me with the dishes, would you, sweet?”

I stood and began to stack the plates. The floorboards in the hallway squeaked as Uncle Ben walked back to the kitchen.

“Joulla, fetch my herb bag from the bench, would you?” he said from the doorway.

I turned to look at Uncle Ben and caught sight of the man standing behind him: a Blue Cloak mage with copper-coloured hair and a crooked nose, his face a distinct green. His eyes met mine.

I dropped the porcelain plate I was holding. It shattered into a dozen pieces.

“*You!*” the mage said, eyes widening in recognition.

Uncle Ben looked at me. “You’ve met?”

"She did this to me," he croaked. My stomach lurched in fear.

"What do you mean?" Uncle Ben said, clearing his throat nervously. "This is our niece, Joulla—of course she had nothing to do with whatever made you ill, Farred. You must have eaten something."

"It was magic, alright," the mage said. "She deliberately cursed me."

"Surely you're mistaken," Uncle Ben said.

But Aunt Loris had turned to me, her eyes wide. "What did you do, Joulla? What did you *do*?"

"Loris, stop—" Uncle Ben began.

But Aunt Loris was panicking. "Oh not here too," she said in a wailing voice. "We took you in of our own good will, knowing full well what you'd done. How could you do this to the captain of the garrison of all people? Girls don't do magic—they *shouldn't*. You're an evil girl, Joulla—an evil girl!"

For a moment everyone was silent. I looked from Uncle Ben to the Blue Cloak and back again. Uncle Ben was frozen, fear on his lined face.

The mage was staring at me. I couldn't hold his accusing gaze. After several seconds, my face burned, and I dropped my eyes. That sealed my guilt.

"I think you'd best work your magic, Ben," the mage said, wincing and putting a hand to his stomach. "And then you know what will have to happen."

"Surely we can come to an arrangement—" Uncle Ben began.

"No," the mage said shortly. "Do your magic, here, now, Ben. Your niece will return with me to the barracks."

Uncle Ben looked at me, resignation in his face. He couldn't do anything, I realised.

It was useless me running—it was now evening and the town gate was closed, guarded closely by the Blue Cloak watch. And who in the town would hide me if I ran? No one would dare risk the ire of the garrison. Blue Cloaks were renowned for tracking people down, using their magic to find even the most elusive of fugitives. Besides, if I gave even the slightest hint that I was contemplating flight, the mage could have me kneeling at his feet with a single flick of his hand.

I stood there, feeling numb while Uncle Ben put his hands to the mage's stomach and spoke several words. He handed the mage a parcel of herbs from his bag.

"Put a glass of water under your bed tonight, just beneath your head," Uncle Ben said. "It should absorb the remainder of the spell, if it was indeed a spell that caused your illness, Farred."

"My thanks," the Blue Cloak said, straightening. He moved to my side, and clipped something over my wrist—a silver coloured band, cold against my skin. "And my apologies. You understand, I'm sure, Ben, that we are bound by oath to enforce the law, just as you are bound by oath to heal others."

"I wish I could change the law," Uncle Ben said, shaking his head sadly. He put his hand briefly on my shoulder. Aunt Loris looked at me and pursed her lips, saying nothing. I swallowed down the lump in my throat and followed the Blue Cloak out of the house and into the street outside.

The town was blanketed in darkness, broken only by the pale glow of street lamps lit by magic. The moon

hadn't yet risen and the sky was overcast, blocking the dim light of the stars. For a moment I contemplated slipping away in the gloom.

As if he had sensed my thoughts, the Blue Cloak glanced at me.

"There's no sense trying to escape," he said. "I've cast a binding spell on you."

And indeed, I felt my legs struggling to keep up with his, forced to follow almost exactly in his footsteps. There was no escape. I had cursed a Blue Cloak and killed a village. It was too late to run.

Chapter Three

The barracks housing the garrison was set on the hilltop above the town. I'd never been there, only seen it from the streets below. It was a round, bleak stone building. By night, it was lit by blazing torches that gleamed with unnatural mage light, illuminating everything within twenty feet and casting flickering shadows into the darkness.

Several Blue Cloaks stationed on either side of the barracks gate saluted the mage as we walked through the entrance.

"Who've you got there, Farred?" one called, grinning openly.

"Entertainment for the evening?" said the other with a chuckle.

A brief smile crossed the captain's face, but he kept walking. I hated him in that moment.

We strode across the central white gravel courtyard that the barracks encircled and up the stairs into the barracks walls, past flickering torches and braziers. Down a hallway, past open and closed doors we walked, until the mage reached a door on the right and held up his hand. The door opened of its own accord.

The suite inside was surprisingly simple, carpeted in deep royal blue. A round, polished wooden table stood in the middle of the room. Several wooden chairs and a sofa faced a wall dedicated entirely to books—I knew they were books because Uncle Ben had several in his consulting room, even though I couldn't read. There was a large standing mirror in the corner, an odd thing of vanity in comparison to the relatively simple furnishings.

Glass doors to one side opened out onto a balcony, overlooking the river below.

The mage walked through a doorway set in the wall opposite and entered a much smaller room. Deep chairs and a sofa were placed in front of the fireplace that blazed with flickering tongues of real fire. Several weapons hung on the wall to my left—a sword, a dagger and a crossbow. A shelf in the far wall held an assortment of glass decanters filled with coloured liquids. There was an open doorway to the right, leading to what looked like a sleeping chamber.

The mage moved to the side bench, his back to me. I took the opportunity to pull at the shackle digging into my arm, hoping that it might snap or I could somehow manoeuvre my hand out of it.

“It won’t break,” the Blue Cloak said without looking up, pouring himself a drink from a decanter on the bench. He turned to face me, lounging against the bench, holding his glass in one hand. He really was quite striking, with unruly red hair and a once-broken nose set above a decisive jaw.

“You’ve confused me with someone else,” I said, pulling again at the shackle.

“Really?” he said, running his finger along the rim of the glass. “I always remember the pretty girls I see—there are so few around here these days.” He looked at me, a deliberate challenge in his eyes.

I knew he was provoking me, but still I felt a surge of anger, and my eyes blazed. Almost in tandem, the shackle sparked and burned a deep, icy cold into my wrist. I cried out.

“It’s silver, with a few other things thrown in,” he said clinically, eyes on the shackle. “Every time you try to use magic, it will burn you.”

“I can’t use magic,” I said, thinking of Aunt Loris. “I’m a woman.”

“See, when you say it like that, it’s clear that you don’t really believe it,” he said. “I’d suggest adding a little more emphasis, a little more fire in your eyes, and much more incredulity if you really want to put on a convincing show. How did you kill all those people in your village?”

The question came from nowhere. I felt as though a fist had closed around my heart, squeezing it.

“It was you, wasn’t it?” he continued conversationally. “The cart driver mentioned a girl of your appearance and thought it odd that the one surviving family would ask him to carry their daughter to Aubergen. Oh, there’s no need to protest, pretend you have no idea what I’m talking about—I sent a squadron there yesterday. It was only a matter of time until we tracked you down.”

“Captain,” I began, my voice now pleading. The punishment for women using magic was death. Despite my dark thoughts this morning, I couldn’t bring the shame of an execution upon my family. “It is Captain, isn’t it?”

He inclined his head.

“My name is Joulla,” I said, deciding to go with an emotional appeal. “I’m from a farm near that village you mentioned. Yes, it’s true the carter did bring me here, but only because my aunt and uncle needed someone to help them, with my uncle being so busy these days. Your words surprise me, for if someone did indeed use magic

to kill the entire village, they should be stopped. You should be searching for whoever that cold-hearted murderer is and bringing them to justice.”

He put down his glass and took a step towards me.

“Do you take me for a fool?” he said quietly. “Oh, you can protest that girls don’t do magic, but every year around Paladel, we Blue Cloaks arrest a small number of girls who have bottled up their magic so tightly that it led to disaster. Sad, really—if they’d been boys, they’d have been trained and assigned to a master. But the law is clear.”

I swallowed. “You’re going to execute me.”

“It’s expected in these circumstances,” he said in a detached voice, as though we were talking about the price of wool. “That’s what that silver sword is for.” He indicated the sword hanging from the wall.

My heart thudded painfully. This was it—I was going to die.

Someone knocked on the door.

“Enter,” the mage said sharply.

The door opened and a Blue Cloak, wearing the ordinary blue and grey uniform of the non-magically trained members of the garrison, poked his head in from the outer room.

“Apologies, Captain, but Lord Dom is outside with the Archmage and the other guests from Cadeira. They wish to speak with you. Shall I send them in here?”

The captain glanced at me. “No. Best show them into the council room. You,” he said to me, “wait here.” And he followed the man out.

I waited until the lock of the door had clicked behind him and exhaled, a deep, shuddering expulsion of breath.

How could I have possibly thought of jumping from the town wall this morning? Now that death was almost certain, I was so terrified that I felt as though I was going to throw up. I couldn't breathe, couldn't think. My hands were shaking, sweating. I looked up at the silver sword hanging on the wall and felt a wave of dizziness hit me.

My poor mother, my father—Uncle Ben and Aunt Loris. They'd never be able to shake the shame that my public death would bring them, for word would spread across all the districts like a summer grassfire that Allard and Bena's daughter had used magic to kill her entire village and curse a mage. My family would be impoverished, made outcasts, and no one would buy their wheat or their wool. Uncle Ben's clinic would close, and people would shun him and Aunt Loris. No one would want to marry Farah, knowing that our bloodline passed on magic to girls. She would die an old maid, left to look after Nera alone, and people would curse them as witches from afar. How could I have been so stupid?

Warm tears began to fall down my cheeks. As though released, a deep reservoir of emotion welled up in my chest and threatened to escape through my throat. I stuffed my hand in my mouth to prevent sobs escaping and tried to bring my focus back to controlling my breathing.

After several moments, I became aware of muffled voices from the front room. Were they discussing me, deciding who would deal the fatal blow? Trying to steady my breathing, I moved to the door and put my ear to it.

"There's nothing between here and Vanderley to stop them," an unfamiliar male voice was saying. "They'll be here within three weeks, a month at the most."

“What happened in Camberlay?” a quiet voice that sounded like Captain Farred’s asked.

“It fell within a day,” the first voice said. “They killed every mage and soldier and took the women for themselves. Reports say they set fire to the city and burned the countryside.”

“And what of Imbrall?” Captain Farred asked. “Vanderley?”

“Both surrendered unconditionally,” the man said. “Right now, Aubergen is the only fortified town standing between the Cyrene army and Cadeira.”

An army was marching towards Aubergen? I forgot about the tears drying on my cheeks and pressed my ear closer to the door.

Someone spoke in a hearty, booming voice—Lord Dom, I thought, remembering his distinct voice from his addresses to the townsfolk during the Midsummer Festival. “Of course we will mount a defence to stop the Cyrene army before it can reach Cadeira, good Lorcas. We have a number of magicians among our garrison, not to mention a talented mage in Captain Farred here. But we’ll need more than a handful of magicians to properly defend the town.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible,” said the man called Lorcas. “We’ll be withdrawing all mages and troops from the Aubergen garrison to contribute to the defence of Cadeira.”

There was a brief silence, broken only by the thump of my heart beating unnaturally loud in my ears.

“With respect, sir, you’re talking about leaving the entire town defenceless,” Captain Farred said.

“It would be a pointless exercise trying to mount a full defence here, with the few natural defences that Aubergen has,” Lorcass said. “The town wouldn’t have a hope, even with a platoon of sorcerers. We’ll need every able-bodied mage and soldier to defend Cadeira. I hardly need remind you that if Cadeira falls, all of Paladel will fall with it.”

“But—every remaining mage in the town will be slaughtered,” Lord Dom said, his voice breaking. “Our White Cloaks, our Red Cloaks. Not to mention the women and children. The Accords of Vanderley clearly state that the magocracy will protect the provinces in return for the tithes of our young men. Would you cast the provisions of the Accords aside so easily?”

“You make a fair point, good Dom,” an unfamiliar voice said. “We can hardly leave the town defenceless without a small contingent to assist here. What’s your name again, Captain?”

“Farred,” Captain Farred said. “Of Locwood, far to the west.”

“I remember you—graduated with distinction. Tactical magic, as I recall. This is your first posting, is it not? How long have you been here?”

“Six months, sir.”

“We’ll leave you with twenty ordinary soldiers at your disposal. I’m sure with your creativity you’ll be able to delay the Cyrene army for several days. The more time you can give us to prepare our defences in Cadeira, the better.”

There was a pause. “Again, perhaps I misunderstood your words, sir,” Captain Farred said, his tone expressionless. “You’re asking me to use the lives of

twenty men to delay the Cyrene army and all of its sorcerers, without any magic besides my own.”

“Minstrels will sing of your heroic deeds for centuries to come,” said the man. “I’ll personally make sure that your family in Locwood is bestowed with honour and compensated well for their loss.”

“If that wasn’t clear, you will defend the town to delay the Cyrene army for as long as possible, and you will defend it to the death,” Lorcas said. “This is a direct order, Farred—from your Archmage, and from me.”

The silence following his words was heavy.

“Yes, sir,” Captain Farred said at last. His tone betrayed no hint of what he felt.

“Lord Dom,” said Lorcas, “the Crown is willing to provide shelter in Cadeira to a small number of noble families from the provinces. I’m sure you and your family would be very welcome. You’ve served your town well and you deserve to be rewarded for it. Shall we retire now to the castle, and converse more over wine? Farred, we’ll talk more in the morning before we take our leave.”

I heard the sound of chairs being pushed back and hastily stepped away from the door.

No matter what happened to me this evening, an army was marching on Aubergen, an army that killed mages and raped women. I felt a stab of fear for my parents, for poor defenceless Nera. I knew little of the ways of mages or the politics of Cadeira but I knew with absolute certainty that this was unfair. Aubergen was doomed, and with it, the lives of the people I loved.

The door opened and Captain Farred entered. He blinked when he saw me.

“Oh,” he said. “You’re still here.”

Of course I was still here. Where else was I supposed to have gone?

He rubbed his forehead and sat in one of the deep chairs in front of the fireplace, staring into the flickering orange-yellow flames. His face was pale and drawn.

“Am I free to go?” I asked after several moments. It was worth a try.

“What?” he said absently.

“May I take my leave?”

He stared at me, his hazel eyes far away. After several seconds he blinked.

“How did you kill all those people in your village? What were there—three hundred souls?”

“I didn’t—”

He held up a hand. “Please, don’t. Just tell me.”

I swallowed, for now I was admitting what I hadn’t even fully admitted to myself before now. “It was a simple enough matter to manipulate the tiny things in their stomachs.”

“Tiny things?”

“Things that we can’t see, that are in everything we eat and drink. Certain types are harmful to humans in large amounts.”

“You mean bacteria?” he asked, forehead furrowing.

“I suppose so,” I said. “I don’t know what they’re called.”

“And you deliberately manipulated them, so that you were able to poison an entire village?”

“I didn’t mean to,” I said. “The thought crossed my mind when I was angry about—about something—that I

could do it if I wanted to, and the people I was angry with would be sorry if I did.”

“And what about what you did to me?” he asked.

“It was the same thing,” I said. “I was angry, so I thought about the tiny things in your stomach and convinced them to multiply.”

Again, he stared at me, so long that I started to feel uncomfortable.

“May I go?” I said to break that stare.

He drew a breath. “Perhaps I’m mad. Others would likely say so. But for now, you’ll remain a prisoner.”

“What?” I said, tears stinging my eyes.

“We’ll talk more once I’ve had time to think.” He nodded to indicate I was dismissed.

I stood there, feeling awkward. “Aren’t you going to lock me in a cell?”

“What for? The shackle around your wrist will do a much better job than the walls of a cell ever could.” Again he nodded at me dismissively, and turned away.

“What am I supposed to do?” I said blankly. “Wander the barracks?”

“I don’t know,” he said, turning back to me, a note of irritation in his voice. “Cook something, wash something, write a poem for all I care.”

“Cook something?” I said incredulously.

“I told you to take your leave.”

“I don’t know where to go!” I protested.

“Do you *want* to be locked in a cell?” he demanded. “Would that satisfy your expectations of how a prisoner should be treated?”

“Of course not,” I said, my voice rising. “I’ve never been a prisoner before and I’ve never been in the barracks. Surely you can understand that I’m confused.”

He sighed as though everything that had happened this evening was my fault, stood and crossed the room. He put his hand to the shackle. I heard a faint whisper.

“You’ll be able to wander the barracks, but not leave its walls,” he said. “Find a servant or someone to settle you in. Do some work and make yourself useful. I’m not here to entertain you, and I’ve got other matters to attend to.”