

Chapter 1

Hospitallers' Priory of St Mary, Dartmoor Eve of May Day and Feast of Beltane, 1316

That night, of all nights, Sister Fina was late. If she had arrived on time to close the holy well beneath the chapel, perhaps she might have averted all that came after, but she hadn't. And it was Sister Clarice who was to blame. Never let that woman start talking if you're in a hurry.

'Could I beg a moment of your time, Sister Fina?' she'd say.

But it never was just a *moment*.

Sister Basilia, who wouldn't hear a bad word said about any soul, not even if they'd murdered every child in Widecombe, once told her fellow Hospitallers they should be thankful for Clarice's *gift* of words, as it pleased her to call it, for she said the pedlars and merchants were so battered down by them they gave her what she wanted at half the price just to get away. The other sisters had rolled their eyes, for Basilia was cheerfully determined to see God's blessing in everything, even a burned bun, which vexed them even more than Clarice's nagging.

That night, Clarice's *little word* was about the extravagant

use of candles, or was it beeswax polish? Probably both, Sister Fina couldn't remember. She'd long stopped listening, though that hadn't stopped Clarice talking, and by the time Fina eventually hurried across the priory courtyard it was already dark. She'd had to light a lantern to avoid tripping over the abandoned pails and pitchforks littering the cobbles. The priory cat, which was ignoring the mice and hunting for scraps of roast mutton, hissed as the sister's heavy black skirts clipped her tail. Fina giggled, for the little beast sounded just like Clarice sucking her breath through her teeth at the wanton waste of yet another candle. But it served the old steward right: if she hadn't lectured her for so long, Fina wouldn't have needed to burn one.

Even though the buildings surrounding the courtyard gave some shelter, the cold wind almost ripped the cloak from Fina's shoulders as she picked her way towards the chapel. But it sounded even louder inside, as if the devil was beating his tail against the stone walls in a violent rage, furious that he'd been shut out. Fina glanced up at the tiny stained-glass window above the altar. She was always afraid the wind would blow it in if the rain didn't smash it first. Basilia said that the casement was too narrow to come to any harm, but Fina took care not to stand too close.

Fina was the youngest of the eight sisters at the priory and taller than all of them. Her shoulders were perpetually hunched as if she was trying to make herself shorter, but her red-raw bony hands and feet looked as if they'd been intended for someone twice her height, and she'd been given them by mistake.

She hurried across the stone floor, the cold seeping up through her thin leather soles, and locked the pilgrims' door at the opposite side of the round chapel, which allowed

worshippers to enter the church without going through the priory. She didn't want any villagers slipping in while her back was turned. Then she ducked beneath the low arch of the doorway that led to the well. The narrow stone staircase spiralled down into the darkness and, far below, she could hear the splashing of water in spite of the roar of the gale outside. But even before she'd taken a step, something made her draw back.

The rock walls of the staircase always glimmered for they were covered with a fur of delicate green moss that radiated a strange emerald-gold light whenever the candles were burning below, like glow-worms twinkling on a summer's night. Pilgrims gasped in awe when they first saw it. When they thought no one was watching, some scraped their fingernails down those walls to steal what they imagined to be a strip of precious gold, but they found themselves grasping only a handful of wet mud. That gave them a fright, thinking St Lucia had turned gold into dirt to punish their thieving. Fina had been tending the well daily for a year or more and the golden light was as commonplace to her as a loaf of bread, but what she saw that night certainly wasn't. The walls were glowing with a ruby-red light that throbbed and pulsed like a beating heart. She felt as if she was staring down into the belly of the hill slashed open. The rocks were bleeding.

The sight so terrified her that she almost slammed the door and fled, but she was more afraid of her prioress's tongue. That woman's glare could freeze the sun in the sky. Fina forced herself to examine the walls again. But she could make no sense of what she saw. Was the red glow coming from a fire in the cave below? She sniffed, but there was no smell of smoke and, besides, there was nothing much to burn down there, except the St Brigid crosses left by pilgrims

or the rags they dipped into the holy water. And Prioress Johanne always insisted those filthy offerings were cleared away nightly.

Still clutching the lantern, Fina slowly descended the uneven stone steps, holding herself tense and ready to retreat at the first sign of flames. The holy spring gushed out of a gap between three rocks in the wall and poured into an ancient stone trough, just long and wide enough for a man to lie in, as if he was in his own coffin. Fat yellow candles burned on the spikes that had been driven into the rock on either side of the spring. The melted wax dripped down the rock face to form frozen waterfalls at the base. But when Fina reached the point on the stairs where the interior of the cave became visible, she thought she saw something red glowing at the bottom of the trough, as if a scarlet flame burned beneath the water. It was there only for the blink of an eye. Then it was gone, and soft yellow candlelight flickered across the rocky floor once more.

Ducking under a low jag of rock, she stepped down into the cave and edged towards the spring, thinking that a pilgrim must have thrown a jewel into the water, which had caught the light, but there were only the usual bent pins and silver pennies in the trough, nothing else, except a few stems of the creamy-white flowers of may blossom floating on the surface – another offering from a villager that would have brought a frown to Prioress Johanne's brow if she'd seen it.

Some village girl had probably been using the flowers to sprinkle herself with the spring water in the belief that on the eve of May Day it would turn her into a beauty. As a child, Fina had watched the servant girls in her father's manor house do such things and was almost tempted to copy them now, but her prioress's face rose in front of her, like an

archangel with a flaming sword. She'd never be able to hide such a sin from her inquisitorial gaze.

Fina scooped out the dripping flowers, crushing them in her fist. A stray thorn pierced her palm and she winced, glancing guiltily up at the painted wooden statue of St Lucia above the well. The saint knew her thoughts and was punishing her.

Averting her eyes, Fina searched the cave for what her prioress called 'rubbish' – a bandage stiff with dried blood, a three-armed cross woven from rushes, and a crude doll fashioned from reeds and wrapped in a white rag. By now, Fina knew all of the little holes and crevices in the cave where the local women tried to hide such things, and it didn't take her long for the cave wasn't large. There was room for only four or five people to crowd in around the well, though mostly they came in ones and twos.

The figure of St Lucia, patron saint of the blind, stood in a niche above the spring, for the sisters had dedicated the well to her. The long wooden dagger in her hands pointed menacingly at the pilgrims as if she meant to kill any sinner who despoiled it. Johanne had had the statue installed there when she had been elected as prioress eight years ago, to remind everyone that they should pray to the saint that the waters might heal them. No one ever dared say as much to the prioress, but in truth only the sisters of the Knights of St John and a few of the pilgrims ever offered their prayers to her at this well.

Old Kendra and her tribe of daughters, who once were the keepers of the spring, called it Bryde's Well and they'd cursed the whole priory on the day it was blessed for St Lucia. Prioress Johanne had forbidden them to come near the place, but the villagers who crept down to the cave still

whispered the old name and made their prayers and offerings of clooties, pins and three-armed crosses not to the saint gazing down at their spring, but to the ancient one, the stone face that stared out at them behind the spring through a veil of water.

The prioress had not brought her to the holy well. That face had been watching over the spring centuries before the first Hospitaller sisters had set their dainty feet upon the moors a mere thirty years ago. Compared to that ancient carving, the sisters were no more than blades of grass beneath an ancient oak.

Fina tried never to look at the stone carving, though the face always drew her gaze, like a viper lying coiled in the corner of a room. It was hard to make out the features beneath the cascade, especially in the flickering candlelight. Basilia said it was a woman's face, with ears of wheat sprouting from her eyes and mouth. Melisene was sure it was the face of the sun, with tongues of fire leaping from it. The prioress said it was the face of a she-devil, who now lay crushed beneath the holy feet of St Lucia.

But Fina saw a skull surmounted by a warrior's helmet, with burning spears shooting from it, and when she was alone in the cave, she saw those spears dance with flame and the skull turn to stare at her. Even though she tried to convince herself it must be a trick of the candlelight flickering over the twisting water, even though she knew the demon had been crushed, still she could not shake off the feeling that the she-devil was very far from dead.

She shivered and, taking care not to look at the stone carving, rolled up the black sleeve of her kirtle. Clenching her jaw against the cold, she plunged her arm into the icy water to scoop out the glittering silver coins from the bottom

of the pool. Even the bent pins had to be collected, for whenever they had amassed a boxful, they were sold to be melted down for their silver. But it was like trying to snatch minnows with your bare hands. The pins and coins were never where they appeared to be under the water. Over the past months, Fina had learned the skill of catching them, but that night, perhaps because she was still unnerved by the red glow she had seen, her fingers were as clumsy as those of an old woman with palsy, and the ripples she made as she lunged for them only sent them drifting further away. She gave up. She was hungry for her supper. The prioress would not come down here so late. She'd try again in the morning.

She blew out the candles on either side of the spring. Shadows closed in, like a pack of wolves, and only where the feeble light from her horn lantern flickered over the walls did the moss still glow with a green-gold haze. Once the light was gone, like the water, the moss turned black. She hurried up the stairs and into the safety of the chapel, slamming the door to the staircase behind her, as if the darkness might come bounding after her.

As the door banged, there came a yelp of fear. Fina spun round. The chapel had been empty when she'd gone down, she was sure, just as she was certain she'd locked the far door leading to the outside. But now a little boy was standing by the stone altar, gripping the corner tightly in both hands, turning his head this way and that, as if trying to see what had made the sudden noise.

He looked seven or eight years old, his tangled black hair curling over the top of a brown homespun jerkin. Fina thought he must be travelling with a family who'd taken shelter in the pilgrims' hall for the night and, as children

do, had gone exploring and somehow found his way into the chapel through the door from the courtyard, which she'd left unlocked.

'What are you doing in here, child?' She took a few paces towards him, intending to usher him out. 'The holy well is closed for the night. You—' She broke off. He was cringing, his arm raised over his face as if he expected a blow.

She held up her hands to assure him she meant him no harm. 'We'd best get you back to your kin before they start to fear the wisht hounds have taken you.'

She'd meant it as a joke, but he seemed even more terrified.

'Come,' she said, as gently as she could. 'Supper will be served soon and you don't want to miss that. There'll be a good hot soup. Well, the soup will be hot, at least.'

Good was not a word anyone bestowed on the cook's meals in the pilgrims' hall. Even when he did flavour the pottage with herbs or a bone stock, all you could ever smell was burned beans. That man could scorch water. The sisters always gave heartfelt thanks that Goodwife Sibyl cooked for them.

Fina raised the lantern, more to let the child see that she was smiling than to study his face. Only then did she realise the boy wasn't looking at her. His head was turning from side to side, as if he couldn't understand where her voice was coming from. His eyes were as dark as the peat-black bog pools, clear and unclouded. Twin reflections of the flame in the lantern blazed in the wide, bright pupils, but he couldn't see that light. He was blind.

She touched his shoulder and he started violently. Then his fingers inched up to grasp hers. He clung to her with a hand as cold as the water in the well below, yet his touch

seared too, like ice sticking to bare skin, and she had to force herself not to flinch.

It took Fina and the boy some time to reach the pilgrims' hall, though it was only across the corner of the courtyard. The child was afraid to move. He stumbled on the cobbles and kept stopping abruptly whenever he thought he might bump into something.

That evening, only five people occupied the long, narrow chamber where travellers in need of a night's shelter ate at the scrubbed table and slept on the straw pallets on the floor. Two were pedlars, the others a master cordwainer and his pregnant wife, the last an old woman who, from her torn but costly gown, looked as if she had once known better times. But none recognised the boy or remembered seeing such a lad with anyone on the road.

Leading the child out into the courtyard again, Fina pulled him into the infirmary, which stood alongside the pilgrims' hall, where the sick, the frail and those travellers in need of many days or weeks of rest were cared for. There were a dozen beds and most were occupied.

Sister Fina's gaze darted at once to the far corner, where Sebastian sat curled on a heap of sheepskins as far from the fire as he could get. He'd been there longer than any of the others, longer than most of the sisters, and though he wasn't an old man, the hair that tumbled down his back was white and his limbs thin as worms, every joint swollen and twisted at odd angles. He was staring at a crucifix in his lap, clumsily rubbing the wounded hand of Christ with the tip of a finger, as if he was trying to soothe the hurt. Fina was relieved that he appeared quiet and calm tonight. She did not want him frightening the boy, for Sebastian would sometimes

cower and scream, as if he was being tormented by all the demons in Hell. Many of the servants whispered that he was possessed but, curiously, it was often Prioress Johanne who calmed him when he was seized by these evil spirits. Although Fina couldn't begin to imagine how, for in her experience the prioress was more formidable than a legion of devils and more likely to scare someone out of their wits than into them.

Sister Basilia, the infirmarer, was at the other end of the hall, apparently giving instructions to one of the female servants. There was a mulish expression on the maid's face, and she folded her arms sullenly, staring at the long table on which the remains of supper still lay – burned mutton broth by the smell of it. Basilia kept smiling as if she was quite certain the woman would do whatever she was plainly resisting. She reminded Fina of a plump, eager spaniel, always wagging her tail and jumping up, convinced that everyone she met wanted to be friends.

She broke off as she caught sight of Fina and bustled over, while the servant seized the opportunity to escape, collecting the wooden bowls from the table with ill-tempered bangs and clatters.

Basilia beamed down at the child still clutching Fina's hand. 'And who have we here?' She gave the black curls a vigorous pat. The boy shrank back. She chuckled. 'Shy little fellow, isn't he?'

'Not shy, Sister.' Fina hesitated, then guided him to an empty bed. She prised his icy fingers from her hand and pressed them to the straw mattress. 'There . . . a good, warm place to sleep. Can you feel the wall behind? You stay here. I'll be back in a moment.'

The boy stood where she'd left him, his hands dangling,

his head turning this way and that to follow the many voices and clatter of dishes, but he made no attempt to touch anything around him.

Fina returned to Basilia and drew her aside. 'I found him alone in the chapel. He's blind, but I don't believe he can have been so for long – he has not learned to use his hands to discover where he is and he can't follow sounds, as Father Guthlac can.'

She nodded towards an elderly man sitting close to the fire, his fingers and lips moving as he recited his paternosters, counting them off on his string of beads. But his mind seemed not entirely focused on his devotions, for he cocked his head, listening to the chatter around him, smiling at this, frowning at that, occasionally calling a remark mid-prayer. His sight had faded gradually over the years, but with the help of his deacon he'd still been able to perform his duties as parish priest. Like most, he had never been able to read much Latin and had always gabbled the services by rote, so his parishioners scarcely noticed when darkness had closed in upon his world.

Basilia glanced over Fina's shoulder at the boy. 'Who brought the poor mite here?'

'I don't know, but someone must have. He can't have found his own way in. He's not even able to cross a room alone. He can't tell me where he came from or who he is. He hasn't uttered a word. I don't know if his kin have abandoned him to our care, or they mean to return for him, if he can be healed.'

Basilia regarded her with sad, reproachful eyes, as if she'd betrayed their faith in thinking that St Lucia might not perform a miracle. 'Imagine leaving a child when he needs you most. What mother would do such a thing?' She puffed

up her chest like an indignant hen. For a moment Fina thought she would march over to the boy and gather him up in her arms, like a baby.

They all knew that it was Basilia's greatest sorrow that she had no children. But with a litter of lusty sons to provide for, in addition to his daughters, her father had been able to offer land enough only for one of his girls to acquire a husband of suitable rank.

'Maybe he has no mother,' Fina said. 'And no one else can spare food for him. The famine is biting hard and if he can't work . . . You see how he is. He can do nothing for himself.'

'But he can learn,' Basilia said firmly. 'And there's no one better to teach him than Father Guthlac. He'd still be out tending his flock, if his poor swollen legs would bear him up.'

She lumbered over to the boy, seized his hand and dragged him towards the old priest. In her eagerness, she didn't watch him closely enough and the lad collided with the corner of the table, setting the remaining bowls and spoons on it rattling.

Father Guthlac turned his head towards the sound. 'Who's that?' he called. 'Don't know that tread. I reckon they've been supping too much mead by the way they're crashing about.' He chuckled to himself.

Basilia took the boy by the shoulders and steered him close to the old man. 'A boy brought to us, Father Guthlac. Sister Fina believes he's newly blind and no one's shown him how to get about for himself. We thought you might teach him.'

The old priest raised his hand to silence her. 'Come closer, boy.' He extended a wrinkled hand and grasped the child's sleeve. The boy tried to pull away, but Father Guthlac had

dealt with a good many little sinners in his time and held him firmly by the shoulders. He lifted the boy's arm by the cloth and ran his hand down it until he found the fingers. The old man stiffened, hunching forward in the chair and sucking his breath in noisily through his teeth. His hand darted to the boy's face, running lightly over it, like a spider.

Then the old priest gave a cry of horror and jerked his hand away, as if he'd been stung. His sightless eyes flashed wide in fear. Seizing the staff beside him, he struggled to his feet, his paternoster beads slithering to the floor. He tottered backwards, crossing his breast as if the devil himself had risen up from the ground in a cloud of sulphur. Clutching the corner of the table, he brandished his staff towards where Basilia and the boy stood.

'Drive him out!' he shrieked. 'Drive him out from these halls now.'

'Father Guthlac!' the infirmarer protested, wrapping her arms protectively across the boy's chest. 'Whatever has possessed you? He's a little boy, a helpless child. Didn't you hear me tell you he's blind?'

'If you don't put him out this very hour he'll destroy us. Destroy us all! I know what you are, boy. You may fool those who can look but don't see. But I can see you, boy – see you plain as sin. Be gone, foul creature of darkness!'

Fina rushed forward to try to quieten the priest and help him back to his seat, but he was waving his staff so wildly she was forced to retreat. The servants and the patients who could move had backed away to the corners of the hall as if they were afraid the blind priest might charge towards them. In the corner, Sebastian was moaning in fear. He shrank against the wall, trying in vain to cover his head to protect himself, but he could not raise his poor twisted arms.

Fina tried to placate the old cleric. ‘Father Guthlac, we can find the boy somewhere else to go in the morning. In any case, his kin may have returned by then. But he’ll have to stay here till daylight. The gates are locked for the night.’

The old man’s mouth twisted in fear and rage, a stream of grey spittle trickling from the corner of his mouth. ‘You want your sisters to be alive come cockcrow, then heed me, Sister Fina. You take that demon, bind him tight, and throw him into the sucking mire. For I give you fair warning – if that boy sleeps beneath this roof this night, not one of us will be spared the curse he’ll bring down upon our heads.’