

PROLOGUE

The Mysteries

York

Anno Domini 1417



MY STORY IS NOT a straightforward one. Women's stories never are. To burst free of our fetters, we must first have an awakening. We must be summoned by God. This was how I came to find myself preaching to the women in front of York Minster.

"Every living creature will be saved," I told them as they circled round me. "Those were Dame Julian's words." As I spoke, I heard Julian's voice. Her wisdom caressed me like a feather.

Pilgrims come to see the Corpus Christi mystery plays thronged the cathedral yard. On a decorated hay wain that served as a stage, a costumed troupe from the Mercers' Guild enacted the End of Days, the separation of the blessed and the damned. But the women seemed to have eyes and ears only for me. Burghers' wives, servant girls, pie sellers, and baker women, they leaned in to hear my every word.

"Dame Julian told me she could see no hell. No wrath. Only love. Like the sweetest mother's love for her only child." I swallowed, waiting for that to sink in.

In the awed silence that followed, cooing sounded above our heads. We looked up to see a mourning dove, her wings gleaming gold in the midsummer sun.

Lest I attract too much attention, I drew away from my audience. Ducking my head, I followed the stream of the devout into York Minster, that lofty cathedral bedecked with leafy birch boughs for the feast of Corpus Christi. One Mass had just ended. Before long, another would begin. Palmers lit candles as they recited the Lay Folks' Cat-

echism, for which they would earn an indulgence of forty fewer days in purgatory — or so they'd been told.

Though I tried to hide in plain sight among all the others, I stood out. Clerics regarded me with reproving glances, something I had learned to endure, being such an odd creature, a perpetual wayfarer with no desire to ever return home. A lone woman wandering the wide world with no husband, son, brother, or father to stand at my side and uphold my honor.

Entering the side chapel of the Holy Cross, I knelt on the cold stone floor and began to chant the *Veni Creator Spiritus*. My gaze anchored on the crucifix painted so harrowingly that I saw it through Julian's eyes, as if I were privy to her first revelation those forty years ago. As she lay deathly ill, she beheld Christ's face above hers, and through this grace, she had recovered. But only yesterday the news had reached me that, at the age of seventy-four, Dame Julian of Norwich was well and truly dead.

Though I knew her to be in paradise with our Beloved, our God, I was destroyed by the thought that I would never see her again upon this earth. I was insensible in my sobbing until I felt a sharp tug on my sleeve.

The hairs on my flesh stood on end. A canon with a jeweled pectoral cross loomed over me. Other clerics gathered round, regarding me as if I were some diseased beast who had no right to set foot in this place.

"Madam, why do you weep so noisily?" There was no compassion in the canon's voice, only an aridness that filled my throat with dust.

"Sir," I said, struggling to make the obligatory reverence while he held fast to my sleeve. "You are not to be told."

At that, I attempted to wriggle free, but the clerics formed a solid wall round me.

"You, wolf, what is this clothing you wear?" The canon stared at my white gown and kirtle, my white hood and cloak. "Are you a virgin?" His voice thickened with the insinuation.

"Sir, I am a good Christian wife who has taken a vow of chastity. An honest pilgrim." I pointed to the scallop shell pinned to my cloak, a keepsake from my recent journey to Santiago de Compostela.

"A wife and yet you travel alone?" The canon shook his head. "Do

you have an affidavit from your husband giving you permission to tramp across the land?”

“Sir, my husband gave me leave with his own mouth.” I tried not to tremble before his chilly blue eyes. “Why are you questioning me and not the other pilgrims here who have no more affidavits than I?”

“What cloth is that?” The canon fingered my sleeve, as if hoping to prove that I’d run afoul of the sumptuary laws.

“Plain wool, sir,” I said. “Even the lowliest beggar might wear it. Now if you would let me be on my way.”

How I wished I hadn’t left my pilgrim’s staff behind at my lodgings—it would come to good use right now as I attempted to force a path between two of the skinnier clerics. But the canon laid hold of my arm.

“The law forbids women to preach, and yet I witnessed you performing that very act in the shadow of this holy minster,” he said.

“Sir, I’m no preacher.” I forced myself to hold his gaze. “Never have I spoken from any pulpit. But the Gospels give me leave to speak of God.”

My words only angered the canon all the more. How I infuriated and confounded these men by my very existence—a free-roving woman, neither a proper wife nor a cloistered nun, who presumed to speak of divine love and redemption. A masterless woman without a father or husband to rein me in.

Another man butted in, this one not a cleric but a worldly man, dressed like a princeling in calfskin boots and a brocade doublet. Around his neck he wore the chain of the office of mayor.

“Declare your name and business, woman,” he said.

“My name is Margery Kempe.” A deathly cold crept up my legs. “I hail from Bishop’s Lynn in Norfolk. I’m a good man’s daughter. My father was the Mayor of Lynn five times and an alderman in the Guild of the Holy Trinity,” I added, careful to convey the fact that I came from worthy kindred. “My husband is a burgess of that town.”

“Saint Catherine was eloquent in speech, describing what kin she came from,” the canon said. “But you’re no saint.”

“You,” said the mayor, jabbing his stubby finger at me, “are a strumpet. A Lollard. A deceiver of the people. I believe you’ve come here to take our wives from us and lead them off with you.”

“I’m no Lollard, sir.” A cold wash of panic filled my belly. “I’ve nothing to do with Wycliffe’s disciples.”

Two years ago, John Wycliffe had been declared a heretic. Though the ordained priest had been dead for more than thirty years, they ordered that his corpse be dug out of his grave and burned, all because he had translated the Bible into English. William Sawtry, a vicar from my own parish church of Saint Margaret’s in Lynn, had been burned for Lollardy.

“We have witnesses who heard you quoting the Scriptures,” the mayor said. “How should you come to know the gospels in English unless you’re a Lollard? One of Oldcastle’s whores,” he added, referring to Sir John Oldcastle, the renegade outlaw who had escaped the Tower of London and who threatened to bring down the King in order to establish a Lollard commonwealth.

“Good sirs, I *can’t read!*” I cried in desperation—may God forgive my lie. “I learned my scriptures from listening to sermons and speaking with godly folk,” I added, now telling the truth. “I swear that I uphold the teachings of the Holy Mother Church. I support neither error nor heresy—”

The mayor held up his palm to silence me. “Save that for the trial. You’re under arrest, Margery Kempe.”