

Chapter One

THE GIRL WHO REMADE THE WORLD

The girl who remade the world was born in winter.

It was the last day of the Nameless Moon, and bitterly cold. For as long as she could, the girl's mother, whose name was Willow, walked round and round the outside of the midwife's lodge, leaning on the earthen walls when pains came fiercely. Willow's hair was full of sweat, and her body was steaming like a hot spring. She was trailed by a mist of ice that glittered in the bitter sunlight. She looked like a comet.

She looked like what she was: a woman of power.

Willow was a binder: a woman whose power and duty it was to tie the knots that bound the dead. But her knots could do more than that. When the time was right, she went into the midwife's lodge, and there, as the last binder had taught her, Willow let her power turn backward and undid the knot between herself and her baby, and made an easy birth.

"Ah," said Willow as the babe was placed on her belly. "Ah, look! Look at you!" The baby gave a great squall and started to cry. "Look at you," said Willow, touching the little face. The baby turned toward the touch, rooting for milk. "Just look."

“A girl,” said the midwife. “A beautiful girl. And in the lucky moon too. What will you call her?”

Willow touched the black hair, which was spiked into small peaks with dampness and looked like the thick, wet pelt of an animal. “Otter,” said Willow. She kissed the closed eyes, and they opened, fathomless. Willow cupped her daughter’s little face and gave a mother’s blessing: “I name you Otter. May you be clever and happy. May you have a fierce bite. May you always be warm.”

She touched the dark hair again, and at the touch of her power — still backward, still — the straight spikes sprang into curls. The baby gurgled. The midwife frowned. But Willow did not see, and only smiled, falling into those dark eyes. “May you live with joy.”

So Otter was born, and so she came to girlhood, among Shadowed People, the free women of the forest, in the embrace of mountains so old they were soft-backed, so dark with pine that they were black in summer. A river came out of those mountains, young and quick, shallow and bone-cold. Where it washed into a low meadow, the people had cleared the birch saplings and scrub pines and built a stronghold of sunlight.

The name of their pinch — a forest town was called a pinch — was Westmost, because it was the westernmost human place in the world. If one traveled farther west, upstream, the mountains rose, and the rivers were too small to run in the cold winters, and only the dead lived long.

The dead. Otter grew up almost without fear of them. After all, her home was the safest place in Westmost: the binder’s

lodge. Otter and Willow lived there with the first binder, Tamarack, who was old by the time Otter was born: a woman with hair as soft as milkweed seed and fingers as strong as rawhide knots.

Tamarack, as first binder, was a woman of status; when people came up to her, they covered their eyes. But for Willow — though she was only second binder — for Willow people did not simply cover their eyes. They told tales. It was said that Willow was the greatest binder since the days of the Mad Spider, whose time was sinking from memory to legend. It was said that she had given birth without a single sound. It was said that her ward knots were so strong they could stop the very dust, and leave it hanging, glittering, in the air.

They lived a quiet life, Otter and Willow and Tamarack. Inside their lodge, no one visited, and they were easy with each other: daughter and mother and something near to a grandmother. Outside it, they were honored.

And so Otter grew up as a princeling might grow, or the acolyte of a great priest. Her shirt was made of the skin of a white deer, embroidered with quills and silver disks. But though she could have held herself apart, held herself proud, Otter did not. She was a tumbling child, strong and happy, like the best puppy in the litter. She was the one who led the children in sledding down the snowbanked sides of the earthlodges in winter, splashing in the cold river in summer, spearing fish with sharpened sticks. Her fine clothes were always mud-smearred and tattered. Her mother mended them, and sometimes the embroidery curled loose in Willow's

hands, sinewy threads springing free from the shirt, twinning around the binder's fingers like questing tendrils of morning glory.

Otter was a child; she did not notice the clothes unstitching themselves. Tamarack was old, and her eyes were failing. She did not see it. Willow saw it, watched it, and dreamed of it. But she said nothing.

At the edges of Otter's childhood, the black trees cast shadows, and in those shadows, the dead were always hungry. But Otter did not look too closely at the shadows. As her mother had wished for her, she was clever and warm-hearted and fiercely happy. For a while.