

Chapter 1

It was a sunny evening at the end of a long hot summer. I'd been fishing down in the deep pools of the creek where trout were always plentiful, and was struggling upwards over the warm, bare rock with my catch held in a net in one hand and my rod in the other. I'd got to the flat where I always rested when Johnny Retting and his bunch accosted me.

I wasn't totally unprepared. I'd been the target of Johnny's brutal jokes for ages. At least, since I'd started developing into a woman. Swinging the rod, I caught Peter in the face, but when Charlie Hern grabbed my arms and twisted them behind my back, making me drop my catch onto the hard stone where they slid out of the net, I knew I was in trouble.

Johnny stood in front of me and laughed. I tried to kick him in the nuts, but he dodged aside. I wriggled, and my arm slipped free of Charlie's grip. I swept my body forward and kicked again. I was lucky. My bare foot connected, not exactly where I'd wanted it to, but higher, in Johnny's stomach. He fell back and nearly slipped down the rock face into the river. Charlie regained his hold on me, and this time his clench strengthened.

"Bitch!" Johnny shouted. "I'll show you how a man teaches a bitch to behave." He started to unlace his trousers. This was far beyond his normal teasing and the others were uneasy. Rape, even of a simple peasant girl as I was, held a harsh punishment.

Peter, Steve and Dan interchanged looks of surprise and backed away a fraction. Peter muttered a few words to Johnny, but he was pushed aside. "I'll do what I want, when I want," he declared. "Get her clothes off."

His friends hung back, not liking how things were developing.

"Help me," I pleaded, struggling hard against Charlie's grip.

"Let her go, Johnny," urged Peter. "Charlie, come on."

I struggled against Charlie, but his clench tightened.

"If you won't help getting her clothes off, you won't have her," announced Johnny. "Fuck, I'll do it myself, and show you all who's a man." Charlie heaved me back, cruelly twisting my arms up behind me. Johnny pulled out a knife and advanced. "See, you snotty nosed bitch, I told you I'd have you first."

I could smell strong spirit on his breath and wondered where he'd got the coin to pay for it. Ignoring the pain in my arms, I tried to kick him again.

He extended the knife, and I stilled my struggling. It was better to lose the dress to his blade than to be cut up myself.

"Hold!" came a deep voice from above us. "Five of you? Stealing fish

from one girl? Are you that hungry? I thought that was a well stocked river. Or are you after something else?" The irony in the voice stung.

Johnny glanced up at the big man sitting easily on a roan stallion. "You aren't wanted here, stranger. This isn't any of your business."

"No? Perhaps you're right. But I'm making it my business." The stranger dismounted with an easy movement and danced down the five treacherous steps to the flat of the rock. Johnny turned to face him, his long knife threatening.

The stranger ignored it. He nodded to me, switched his eyes to Charlie's and said quietly, "Unhand her, young man."

Charlie let go of my wrists as if they'd burned him.

I twisted away from him and rubbed my arms hard, trying to get some feeling back into the deadened muscles.

"Now collect the fish which..."

Johnny thrust at the stranger's stomach with his knife. The man hardly seemed to move, but the knife was flicked aside and a sword held at Johnny's throat.

"...are on the ground," finished the man quietly. He turned his attention to Johnny, whose face had gone a pale green colour. "Never fight a stranger," he advised. "You never know how skilled they are, and it may be the last thing you ever discover."

I wanted to laugh, but restrained myself with difficulty, laughing didn't seem suitable for the occasion.

"My lady," said my saviour. "Have you all your catch?"

"Yes, indeed, sir," I answered politely as Charlie handed me the net with the fish in it.

"Then, may I have the pleasure of escorting you to your home?"

Charlie snickered at that, but the rest of the boys kept their silence.

"You may, sir knight," I replied, and blushed as the knight helped me up the slippery slope to where his horse stood waiting patiently.

He lifted me into the saddle as though I were no older than six, though I was sixteen, settling himself behind me with an ease that spoke of years of experience.

I was attempting to guess his age, when he said, "Where is your home?"

That was a question I didn't really want to answer. I hesitated, then said, "Just take me half a league down this road, sir knight. I'll find my own way home."

He chuckled. "Do you mean that you have no home, or are you too ashamed to show it to me?"

"It isn't that I'm ashamed of living where I do," I protested. "It's just that

my brother is..." I hesitated, wondering exactly what word to choose. "... difficult."

"Difficult? In what way? He does not mistreat you, I trust."

"No. He cannot, for he is bedridden, and has been for two months. These fish are, in part, to pay the healer for herbs that help ease his pain."

"How was he injured?"

I found it easy to talk to this stranger and answered, "He was a hunter, probably the best in the village. They brought him home one morning with his back broken, leaving him on his bed to die. I've cared for him since, with help from the healer," I added truthfully.

"And no help from your lord?"

"None. My brother was said to have been hunting my lord's deer. That, I know, he would never do, for it is forbidden and there is much other game." I noticed where we were and said, "Turn left, if you insist on accompanying me to my home."

"I do so insist," he replied evenly.

I began to feel apprehensive at the stranger's reaction to my tiny cottage. Although clean, my brother's injury brought a smell of sickness to it, a stale, stagnant scent that pervaded everything. I had taken to leaving my clothes out so as to avoid the stink. And it was getting worse. No matter what the healer attempted, flesh seemed to fall from my brother's bones, leaving him a gaunt wreck of his former self.

As we approached the cottage I saw the healer outside. There was a small group of men with her; men who knew my brother, and had hunted with him a few months previously. They turned to look at our approach, and a murmur ran through the group.

I knew, and I knew the stranger also understood, the meaning of that compact, silent group.

I slid from the back of the horse and ran toward the cottage. Edward, one of the men, stopped me with a strong arm.

"Janette, you don't want to go inside. Not yet. Let us clean everything up. It be better that way."

I struggled free. "No! Let me see him."

The healer, Anne, grasped my shoulders. "Listen, girl. Edward's right. Let us see to him. Tonight you stay with me. Tomorrow we'll bury him."

I threw off the restraining hands and dodged into the single room. Andrew was on the bed as usual, but his hands were clenched about a dagger that was embedded in his chest. Blood had spilt over the bed and had dried to a rust brown colour. Tears came to my eyes, and I could hardly see.

A comforting arm looped around my shoulders and I knew, without looking, that it was the stranger.

“We have to clear this up,” explained Edward, as much to the stranger as to me. “If the priest found out he had done it himself, there would be no church burial. He’s dead, Janette. At least let him have a Christian grave.”

“He’s right, Janette,” said the deep voice of the stranger. “Let them take care of your brother.” The strong arm turned me and started to lead me out of the hovel. At that moment, I determined never to return to it.

I curved into the comfort of his arms, nestled my face in his fine silk shirt and cried my heart out. All of a sudden the emotions of the past few minutes caught up with me, and everything went black.

The next thing I was conscious of was the scent of roasting fish. I opened my eyes to find my head pillowed on a saddle, and my body covered with a heavy woollen cloak. Fillets of the trout I’d caught that afternoon had been speared onto thin, sharpened twigs and set over an open fire. A few seconds later I knew where I was; at the edge of the big meadow a few feet into the beech trees. It wasn’t exactly a hiding place, but it did offer concealment from most folk. To get behind us a man would need to have learnt to walk in silence over the dry leaves of the forest, which was an impossible task.

The stranger, bent over the fire, didn’t even glance my way, but he was conscious of my awareness.

“I hope you feel up to eating,” he said.

“Yes.” I struggled to a sitting position and stared at the man as if for the first time.

He was tall, well muscled and moved like a soldier, but he bore no arms that I could see. Glancing at his horse I noticed a longbow and a full quiver of arrows, but no sword hung there. Yet I was sure he’d used a sword when he’d defended me from Johnny.

“Edward, the healer, and another man have brought out your things. Well, rather your brother’s things. They could find nothing of yours.”

I nodded. “My clothes began to gather the smell of his illness. I took them out and hid them in the forest.” I didn’t say what else I had hidden, although there was not much of importance: a locket that had been my mother’s, a few silver coins, my bow and arrows.

“Look through his things. If you find anything missing, we’ll investigate.” He paused, hesitated, then asked, “Is Edward your headman?”

“No, not really. But if there could be a vote, he would be elected.”

“I see. He seemed a good man.”

And it was true, Edward was a fine, just man. He was the ideal candidate for a headman, however the lord’s steward had chosen Jacob, whom nobody

liked nor trusted.

“Then your hovel belongs to you?”

“A woman cannot own anything, sir knight. And I am only sixteen years old.”

“You are a woman. A hunter. You can survive in the wild. Many people cannot do that. You should be proud of it.”

“I am,” I replied quietly and wondered how he had known. It was the truth. From the time I was ten I’d found myself at home in the woods and the fields, able to sense the change in the weather and adapt myself to the differing seasons. I seemed to have an inexplicable facility in finding game, even when it was in short supply. Recently, my senses had multiplied.

“Then tell me why Edward was watchful when the healer and the headman handled your things?”

“Jacob?”

“Yes, they called him Jacob.”

“He is a shit.” I wondered why Jacob had been there. He was no friend of mine and had certainly not been a friend of my brother.

A smile crossed his face. “That, I can believe, merely by judging the reaction of Edward. And the healer?”

“Anne...” I hesitated. “She helped my brother. I don’t believe I can give an impartial opinion. Personally, I do not like her, she tends to be overbearing, but that doesn’t mean she’s a bad person.”

“No indeed. If all the people I didn’t like were bad, then the world would be a poor place in truth.”

“So you understand.”

“Yes. But I still do not understand why they were going through your clothes, and appeared to be searching for something of value. What, possibly, could a girl as you are have of value?”

I kept my face calm, but he was getting too close to the truth.

“How could a person, such as I, have anything of value?”

“Exactly! Although you have merely repeated my question.” And while he smiled, I was sure he knew something. “Let us eat. You need to eat, for tomorrow you have to face your brother’s burial and a new life.”

“A new life?”

“Yes. Surely you aren’t going to stay here? The world is large, Janette, and you have a part to play in its future.”

It was strange that he was aware of my intention to leave the village. It had been in my mind since before my brother had been injured. Somehow, I’d never seemed to fit within the structure of the system: the serfs, the freemen, the

semi-nobles and the nobles. Now it was definite. After the funeral tomorrow, I would go.

“I don’t want to stay here, that’s for certain. If I do, sooner or later, someone like Johnny will get to me, and there’ll be no knight on a shining white horse to rescue me.”

“I do not have a white horse,” he said mildly. “But I am a knight. I belong to the Order of the White Tower. My name is Conrad de Throuse.”

I stiffened. The Order of the White Tower was well known, as it was also well known to be proscribed by the bishops. I studied the man more carefully. He was tall, nearly as tall as the village blacksmith, but he didn’t have the blacksmith’s bulk. However, I could tell he was well muscled and had seen him move with the sheer grace that speaks of a well disciplined body.

He wore no armour, merely a brown, silk shirt over which a leather jacket was tied. Leather riding trousers and knee-high boots completed the ensemble. No sword hung at his belt, nor dagger, yet I’d seen him use a sword that afternoon. Perhaps I’d been mistaken and it hung from his saddle.

“It is my pleasure to meet you, Sir Conrad.”

“No, the pleasure is mine, Mistress Janette.”

“Just Janette.”

He tended to the fire without another word and put a few more branches on it. Then he turned the fish. There was a hiss as drops of liquid hit the hot wood and blue smoke rose into his face and eyes. He brought up his right hand to wipe them and I, all of a sudden, noticed the sapphire ring he was wearing.

My abrupt intake of breath and the stiffness of my body caught his attention. He would be a man who was aware of everything around him.

He said nothing, just stared at me and raised a quizzical eyebrow.

I shook my head slowly and forced my muscles to relax. It wasn’t easy. Without seeming to, I watched him closely until I caught the faint glint of a gold chain that encircled his neck.

So, I wondered, is he the one in whom I must confide? Then I calmed myself and thankfully took the thin splinters of wood which speared the roasted fish.

Although I hadn’t thought myself hungry, I ate well. Conrad brought a bag of wine from his saddle and poured the thin, red liquid into two silver cups. It was a little sour, but brought life to my blood. After the third glass I could feel its heat rising to flush my face. I refused the fourth. By that time the fish had been eaten and dusk was falling.

He finished the last of his wine and spread dirt on the glowing embers that marked the fire, dousing it completely. The moon was rising, but was in its first quarter and gave little light. However, I could make out his bulk against the

few early stars as he silently rose to his feet.

“I’m going to check ’round. I believe we are being observed and want to know why.”

I looked inward, to that part of me I used when I hunted. He was right. We were being watched by two men, who were on the very fringes of the woods. I jerked my chin in their direction.

I had no need of words, for Conrad understood immediately. I could sense his acceptance of my knowledge, but he uttered no reply, merely drifted away into the darkness, making not a murmur.

Less than a minute later, there was a startled shout from the direction of the two men, a brief clash of metal, a thud as steel cut into meat. I rose to my feet and drew the long knife I used when hunting.

The knife wasn’t needed. Conrad appeared alone with a sword held in his right hand. Even in the faint moonlight, I could distinguish the dark stain of blood on the blade. Something also glistened at his wrist and I saw, in the thin moonlight, that it was a gold bracelet, holding a dark stone.

“Well?” I asked.

“They had bows and were preparing to shoot.” He shot me a hard glance. “Strange, isn’t it, that you can provoke your lord to order your death. The men were soldiers and wore this badge. They also had full moneybags.”

He handed me a small silver circle in which a half moon had been engraved. I took it mechanically and stared into the far distance.

“This appears to mean that I will have to, after all, miss my brother’s funeral, Sir Conrad. There will be death to pay for this evening’s work.”

“A wise decision. May I accompany you on your quest?”

I stared at him, unseeingly in the darkness. Why should he think that I would be starting a quest? However I merely said formally, “Yes, Sir Conrad, I give you leave to accompany me.”

The big man acknowledged my permission with a jerk of his head and went to get his horse.