

Chapter 1: Bandits

The moon gave a dream-like feel to the woods around him as his horse raced through the night. Daniel crouched lower on the neck of his horse urging it forward. He didn't expect pursuit yet, but he wanted to get as much distance between him and the kingdom of Avery as he could. The dark mass of the trees blotted out the stars making the world seem somehow larger and more terrifying than it was by the light of day. Daniel had never traveled alone at night before. He felt eyes staring at him through the darkness, and he felt that someone or something was watching him, though he knew it was merely his imagination running away with him.

By the faint moonlight, he could see a log blocking the path, but his horse could jump it easily. He kicked in his heels to tell his horse to jump, and the horse rose in the air, easily clearing the log. Daniel, however, didn't. He rose with his horse, but then felt something hit him across his chest, perhaps some invisible rope. He flew back off the horse. His back hit the log, and he rolled to the ground with the wind knocked out of him. That was unexpected. He didn't even see whatever hit him. He'd have to brush it off and go on, but he couldn't get up. He just lay in the dirt in shock.

What had just happened? He looked up to see what had tripped him, but instead saw a man staring at him. The man said nothing, but laughed mockingly. Daniel saw the man pull his fist back. He tried to reach for his sword, but he was too late. The sting of the impact of the man's fist on his jaw burned

through him and his world went black, deep black.

When he came to, daylight was breaking. He looked up at the trees around him, still no sign of what knocked him off his horse. What hit his face was obvious. He'd been ambushed, no doubt about that. Now he had to pull himself together and move on, provided that he could move. His back ached as he sat up, but he was thankful that he could sit at all and that his back was still in one piece, not broken. He felt his jaw. That was some punch. He shivered as a cool morning breeze swirled by. He reached back to pull his cloak around him, but it wasn't there. In fact, neither were his shirt, jerkin, and boots. The thieves had been very thorough and stolen everything – his clothes, his horse, his money, his provisions, his sword – everything! He was left with nothing but his pants. Even his ring with the royal crest was gone. None would dare to steal it, would they? Being caught with it would mean the death of the thief. Still, someone had been brave enough.

He had nothing except an aching body and intense pain from his ankle. He felt defeated, a feeling he had never had before. What was he going to do now?

To begin, he pulled himself together and attempted to stand, but when he first put pressure on his left foot, it collapsed under him with a sharp shooting pain piercing through him, causing him to fall to the ground, and fall hard. Again, he was defeated. He looked around for a stick that he could use for a cane. When he saw one, he scooted over to get it and used it to help himself stand. The piercing pain was almost unbearable, but he had to continue and find help, so he limped along the path. The passing hours were torturous, yet he had to endure. He couldn't give up and die in the woods, so he

continued with sharp pain shooting up his leg on every step and chills running down his aching spine. When the warmth of the sunlight finally made its way through the trees and hit his bare chest, he felt a relief that gave him energy to continue. He had to keep going. The question was where to go?

He didn't know the outskirts of Avery well, for he seldom went out that far in the kingdom. He wasn't even sure how long it would take him to reach civilization. From the woods, he could see no signs of life. Still, he had to keep going. He took a few more steps on his wounded ankle. He could bear the pain. He had to be able to bear the pain. He must go forward. There had to be hope of getting help, for bandits usually stayed in forests near civilization so they would have victims. Daniel pushed himself forward in a seemingly endless pursuit of a village.

After what felt like days of travel, he finally heard signs of life. Music rang through the breeze. He had to be delirious. His imagination was running away with him. Music was not a common sound for a forest. Yet, the more he walked the stronger and more real the song became. Joy swept over him. His misery would be over soon. With all his strength he pushed toward the sound, but despite the elation of hope, the pain and hunger were more than he could bear, and he collapsed near the edge of the woods.

That time he awoke to find his shoulders being held by a maiden who was trying to revive him.

"Wake up. I need to get you to the tavern. Are you all right?" her soft voice asked.

He said nothing, but stared at the fuzzy image in front of

him.

“Can you stand?” the maiden asked. “I don’t think I can carry you, and you can’t walk on that ankle.”

He again said nothing, but he tried to stand. The maiden gave him her hand and pulled him up. She then put his left arm around her shoulders so he could use her as a crutch. Daniel tried to stand on his own, but he had little energy to walk, so the maiden made slow progress trying to support his weight. The walk was painful, and he was aware of very little around him, just blurred images and noises from the tavern. Eventually, the maiden was able to pull him through the back door into the back room.

“Rachel, come quickly! Bring water!” she called. A barmaid with curly blonde hair dipped a mug in a bucket and ran over.

“What’s wrong and who’s the handsome man?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” the maiden responded as she tried to pour the water down his throat.

Daniel wasn’t entirely coherent, but he could tell what was happening. He reached for the mug and quickly guzzled the water which seemed to carry its life-giving force through him and revived him enough so he could see the two maidens in front of him clearly. The one had curly blonde hair. The other had long, straight auburn hair and deep blue eyes.

“Where am I?” he asked.

“*The Frothy Mug*,” the maiden answered as she took the cup from him. “Do you need something to eat? You look weak.”

Daniel leaned back in the chair, exhausted from the day's adventure. "Please," he said. "But I'm afraid I have no money to pay."

The girl motioned to Rachel to get something for him. "Then I will settle for your name."

Daniel looked hesitant. "Da—David," he lied. "And you are?"

"Sarah," she answered. "Now, could you tell me what happened? It isn't usual to find a man lying in the woods with only his pants on. I suppose it was thieves."

"Yes. A band of thieves attacked. I didn't even know what hit me. It was dark, and I was knocked off my horse and beaten before I had time to draw my sword," he explained.

Seeing his swollen ankle, Sarah knelt down to inspect it. "And how did you hurt your ankle?" she asked.

"I think when I was knocked off the horse. My ankle twisted as it came out of the stirrup," he answered.

She touched it, and he winced, obviously trying to keep composure.

"It's very swollen," she noted. "You will need to stay off of it until it heals."

Daniel sat up slightly, trying to appear stronger than he was, and insisted, "But I must go. I need to get a horse and provisions and leave again."

"Why?" Sarah asked, "And what were you doing out riding at night?"

Daniel pulled his foot away. “That is my business,” he responded, “but I assure you that I am no criminal or outlaw.”

Sarah looked at him suspiciously. Should she believe this man? Whether she should or not, he was wounded and did need help. She again picked up his ankle and tended to it. “I don’t know if I can trust you,” she said as she raised his foot to let the blood drain out. “But you can’t travel on your foot, and you have no money for supplies. I will have to see if I can make some arrangement for you to stay here. I will not promise anything. Bartholomew is not known for his generosity.”

“Who is Bartholomew?” Daniel asked.

“He owns *The Frothy Mug*, the tavern you are in, and is not a gentle master,” Sarah answered.

Rachel brought him some pottage and mild barley ale. Having not eaten all day, he pounced on the food, yet with amazingly good manners. Sarah looked at him a little oddly. She’d seen many hungry men and plenty of poor manners, but she’d never seen anyone so ravenous that still sat up properly to eat and didn’t get a drop on him.

Daniel realized the maidens were staring at him and stopped eating. “I’m sorry ladies,” he apologized. “Where are my manners?” He slowed himself down and ate in a truly dignified manner.

“That’s fine. I’ve seen much worse,” Sarah laughed. “It’s just that you are such an enigma. Please tell me who you are and why you were charging around at night.”

He thought for a moment and conceded, “If I must.” He took a few more bites to give himself time to think. “I am

David of the house of Taylor. I left yesterday at sunset to..."

The door to the back room swung open and a large man entered. He was about six feet tall and very stocky, bordering on fat. "Who is this, and why aren't you out serving like you wenches should? There are hungry men out there who want food, and I want their money," he bellowed.

"Terribly sorry, sir," Rachel said as she ran out the door.

Sarah fought off her fear and explained, "This is David. I found him wounded in the woods. He was attacked by bandits."

Bartholomew stepped closer to her and peered down at her with a threatening scowl. "So you felt sorry for him and gave him free food and ale while you left your duties?" He then scowled at Daniel. "Who is going to pay for your food?"

Daniel was going to say that he would as soon as he could send for the money, but Sarah spoke instead.

"You may take it out of my wages," she offered. "Can we make arrangements to keep him here?" she asked timidly. She pointed to his swollen ankle. "He can't walk."

"Not unless he can pay," Bartholomew began, but his scowl turned into an evil grin. "No, wait. I have an idea." He stepped toward Daniel. "I have a deal for you. You may stay here and recover, and I will give you room and board; but for every day you stay for free, you will work for five days afterward for me. If it takes a week to recuperate, you will work for me for five weeks. Deal?"

That was a difficult decision, definitely not the type of offer to jump at, but still to be considered. He needed to leave

immediately and didn't want to have to stay, but was there a better option? Was there really a choice? "Deal," he conceded.

Bartholomew stared at him inches from his face and hissed, "I have your word?"

Feeling extremely uncomfortable, Daniel leaned back as far as he could and conceded, "Yes, you have my word."

Bartholomew stood up victoriously and announced, "Fine, then Sarah may get you a room and get back to work. If you need anything besides room and board, I will add appropriate days of work to your pay off."

"Agreed," Daniel consented meekly. "I could use some clothes. I don't think it would be proper for me to go around in naught but my pants."

Sarah blushed at the comment and suggested, "I could get him something at market."

"You can get to work," Bartholomew bellowed. "I will garnish your wages for the day for spending it helping him instead of working."

"Yes, sir," she replied. She lowered her head and walked out of the room.

Bartholomew turned to Daniel. "We will get you a room after the dinner rush. You can stay here until we get back to you or you can go into the main room." He stared Daniel in the eyes and scolded, "And don't distract the wenches from their duties again. I pay them to work." He stomped out of the room and slammed the door.

Daniel stood up and hobbled over to the door, trying to

ignore the burning pain from his ankle. Going out with the crowd would be more exciting than waiting in the back room, but he might stand out without a shirt on. He opened the door and leaned on the door frame, watching the rowdy group of drunken men and the wenches dancing around to a lively tune. On one side of the room, there seemed to be some type of game going on. A man knelt on the floor with a straight face, and Rachel was trying to make him crack a smile. A few other wenches in the tavern took a turn and tried, yet the man's face stayed placid. It was quite the interesting game, but rather bawdy, definitely not something Daniel would ever do.

A loud noise on the other side of the room diverted his attention. A man swore loudly as he pushed a taller man over the table. Then a hefty sized man struck him. A full force fight broke out, which didn't take long to spread through the room as many of the other men were happy to join in. Rachel ran behind the bar and ducked down. Sarah ran to Daniel.

"I'm sorry about this," she apologized. "It won't last long. They seldom do."

"You mean this is normal?" Daniel asked, with a sinking feeling about having to work to pay off his debt. He then muttered, "I hope my foot heals quickly."

A shattering noise made everyone freeze, instantly silent. Bartholomew stood at the door with a broken bottle in his hand. "That's enough!" he yelled. "Everybody sit or get out!"

The men instantly obeyed. Daniel didn't know that drunken men could move so quickly. Within seconds the room seemed to be back to normal.

"I'm sorry about this," Sarah again told Daniel, putting a

sympathetic hand on his arm. “Unfortunately, it happens often. Don’t worry about it though. You won’t be here very long, and you just have to move out of the way so you won’t get hit. I’ll teach you the ropes.”

Bartholomew stormed over, grabbed Sarah’s arm, and scolded, “You are not paid to talk to the invalid. You have a job to do. Now get out there and get to work.” He shoved her away into the crowded room.

“That’s no way to talk to a lady,” Daniel insisted. “Mind your manners or I’ll...” Daniel faltered as he wasn’t quite sure what he could do given his situation.

Bartholomew got in his face and mocked, “You’ll what – work extra days for me? Be careful. Bad behavior may extend your debt. Now leave Sarah and Rachel alone so they can do their job.” He pushed Daniel and left. Normally a shove like that wouldn’t be a big problem, but with his swollen ankle, Daniel lost his balance and fell to the floor.