

SAGE FOR SANCTUARY

CHAPTER ONE

It was the late summer of the year of our Lord, 1141 and Winchestre was abuzz with rumours of a possible confrontation between Henry, Bishop of Winchestre and brother of King Stephen, and the Empress Matilda, rightful heir to the throne of England. No-one doubted that the matter must be settled, given the empress's determination to seize the crown from her cousin Stephen, but everyone hoped that the matter could be settled amicably – everyone, that is, except Janna and the empress's own entourage. Although they, too, prayed for a peaceful end to the matter, the discovery that all along the bishop had been in league with the queen to further the interests of his brother, the king, led them to fear the worst. Uncovering the bishop's treachery had resulted in the death of several men, with such tragic and horrifying consequences for Janna that she was finding it almost impossible to put the past behind her.

A shaft of misery pierced her heart at the memory of Ralph, whom once she had loved. His death had left her with an aching sense of loss, a desolation of grief. And anger. It was hard, now, to think she could ever love again, ever trust anyone with her heart and her happiness.

With a huge effort, she thrust aside her memories of Ralph and focused instead on the task ahead, for once again she was making the journey to the estate belonging to her father. Although she'd already made the journey several times, each visit left her feeling sick with nerves. Would her father have arrived in Winchestre at last? Could he be awaiting her visit even now? Her heart beat so hard she felt breathless. She swiped her sweaty hands down the fabric of her gown to dry them, and reached to the purse hanging from her girdle to check its contents once more.

Usually she wore the purse inside her gown, close to her skin, to keep it safe, for inside was the proof that must surely persuade her father that she really was his daughter. Her questioning fingers touched and pressed, feeling for the roll of parchment. It was a letter written by her father to Eadgyth, her mother, explaining his prolonged absence and assuring her of his love. Her mother had never read the letter because, Janna had discovered to her dismay, her mother didn't know how to read. And now she was dead. It was because of her mother's death, and the manner of her dying, that Janna had sworn to find her father and bring the man responsible for her death to justice.

It had been a long journey, and hard, but the end was close now, so close. She had discovered the identity of her father, and had also located his manor in England. Warin, her father's steward, had told her that Sire John spent most of his time with his wife and children in Normandy, but Janna had written him a letter. Loving Eadgyth as he had, surely the news that he had a daughter must hasten his return to Winchestre? Surely he must come soon!

Janna turned to her companion. In appearance, he rather resembled a goblin, a man in his late middle age with wispy grey hair and a nose rather too large for his face. She had met him along the road while in the company of a band of pilgrims, and had come to like and trust him. 'Do you think my father has arrived in Winchestre yet, Ulf?' she asked.

The relic seller paused for a moment and stretched, easing his muscles under the weight of the heavy pack he carried on his back. 'Aye, lass. There's been more than enough time for your message to have reached Lord John, and time enough too for him to board a ship from Normandy.' A smile lightened his face. 'Happen he's waiting for you right now. And if not ...' He gestured towards the huge alaunt that trotted at his side. 'Happen it's time to set Brutus onto that shifty steward, just to find out if your message was ever sent!'

'Warin wouldn't dare withhold it!' Janna exclaimed, although the same thought had gnawed away at the back of her mind ever since she'd penned the letter to her unknown father and handed it over to the reluctant steward.

'If your father hasn't arrived yet, let's see if Brutus can frighten the truth out of that whoreson,' Ulf promised.

Janna reached down to fondle the dog's ears, and Brutus paused long enough to lick her fingers. They hadn't always been friends; it had taken a long time to win the dog's trust. And until she'd succeeded, Janna had been frightened of him, just as she was sure that Warin, her father's steward, was afraid of him now, for the dog was large and ferocious, a hound bred specially for hunting. On previous visits to her father's estate, they'd accepted the steward's glib reassurance that the message had been sent and that it was only a matter of time before her father appeared. Perhaps Ulf was right; perhaps, now, it was time to scare Warin into telling the truth.

If her father wasn't there. But what if he was waiting for her even now? Janna's stomach gave an uneasy quiver even though she'd been too nervous to eat any dinner at all. Instead, she had sipped a mug of ale while Ulf wolfed down a hearty meal of blood pudding.

As usual, she had met him at the Bell and Bush, a tavern on the High Street close to the east gate and St Mary's abbey, the Nunnaminster where she had taken up residence in the guest quarters until such time as her father appeared. She and Ulf always met there before their pilgrimage to her father's manor. He told her little of how he occupied his time otherwise. Janna knew only that he had taken cheap lodgings in Tanner Street, on which was a watercourse that was needed by the tanners and dyers and consequently bore the stink of their trades. Ulf eked out a living as a purveyor of the precious relics of saints. Janna knew better than to ask him where he found the wonders that he peddled, for she had her suspicions but didn't want them confirmed. Ulf was a rogue, she felt sure, but she trusted him in everything that mattered. Besides, he had been good to her in the past, and she valued his friendship and his support. Especially now, at a time like this.

'Have you seen anything of Master Thomas and his players?' she asked now, curious for news of the jongleurs who had accompanied them part of the way to Winchestre.

'Nay, not yet.' Ulf chuckled. 'They must have found a safe haven somewhere else, but I'm sure they'll be here in time for St Giles's fair.'

'Everyone will be here for that!' Janna exclaimed, clapping her hands together in excitement at the very thought of it. Although she hadn't been long in Winchestre, she'd already sensed the buzz of excitement as craftsmen worked all day and by the light of rushes and candles at night in anticipation of increased sales of their goods. She looked along the High Street, noting the chapmen with their bulging packs, and the wealthy merchants who were already in town and anxious to

secure the most advantageous position in one of the rows of stalls now being constructed or refurbished on St Giles hill. 'You should do well at the fair, Ulf,' she added.

He twinkled a smile back at her. 'I intend to!' he said gravely.

Janna was tempted to ask what relics he had to trade, but resisted the temptation. She smiled as she thought of the white feather he'd given her, now nestling among the treasures in her purse. She was fairly sure it had come from one or other of the swans that cruised up and down the River Itchen, although Ulf had told her that it had once belonged to the Archangel Gabriel. Wherever it had come from, the present had cheered her at a time of great loss and anguish, and she treasured it because of that.

The section of the High Street known as Chepe Street was becoming ever more crowded as people finished their dinners and came out of the alehouses to barter and buy goods from the shops and pentices spread along the length of the wall of the old palace: bolts of fabric, cords and ribbons, slippers and boots, candles, soap and spices were traded, as well as gold and silver adornments, candlesticks, and fine plate and pottery dishes for those wealthy enough to afford extra luxuries.

A line of carts trundled past, heaped with supplies. Janna frowned as she noted their destination: the old palace in the centre of the town. Then she shrugged, thinking it was as safe a place as any to store goods until it was time for the fair to begin. Her attention was diverted by the beggars among the throng, hands held out for alms. Some were blind, some crippled and some, Janna suspected, were merely chancers, preferring handouts to a hard day's work.

Touched by the sight of a young girl balancing an infant on her hip, she reached into her purse for a coin, certain the pair must be orphans for the girl looked little older than six or seven summers. She felt concerned, knowing they would be living a hand-to-mouth existence if there was no adult to care for them. She held out the coin, which was quickly snatched by a grubby hand. 'God bless you,' she said, and received an incomprehensible mutter in reply.

Janna wondered what had happened to the children's mother. Perhaps she had died in childbirth, which was often the case, but surely there must be a father or aunt or uncle or even grandparents to look after the children? She looked about for someone, and saw the flicker of movement as a man ducked out of sight. Janna was left with the impression of whiskers and a stained tunic. Had he been watching out for the pair, was this how he supported his family?

She moved on, hoping that her coin would be put to good use and not wasted in one of the alehouses. Her nose twitched as the smell intensified; the stench from the open drain that collected water and refuse from the streets that fed into Chepe Street was bad enough, but they were also passing a fishmonger. Janna held her breath as they walked past a display; some of the fish were not altogether fresh. Once forced to breathe once more, she drew in the reek of the butchers' shops. Carcasses of hares and plump birds dangled from hooks; livers, lights and the body parts of larger animals were spread out on a stained counter. A pack of dogs had gathered to stare hopefully at the prizes just out of their reach.

Janna smiled then as she caught sight of a young boy hurtling down the street in pursuit of a hoop which he bowled merrily before him. She realised that he was heading straight for her and hurriedly stepped out of his way, only to have him swerve at the last moment and cannon straight into her.

With a gasp, Janna went down, taking an elbow in the face as the boy tried to stop himself from falling. Brutus started to bark and circle around the fallen pair. Janna cautiously levered herself up into a sitting position. The child shrank against her, staring at Brutus with wide, frightened eyes.

Ulf darted forward. 'Now then, lass, have you hurt yourself?'

'No, I'm unharmed.' Janna waved at him to take Brutus away and turned to the boy. 'Are you all right?' Silly question, she thought, as she noticed blood trickling from a gash on his leg.

He nodded and tried to stand up, but got caught up in the hoop and promptly fell on top of Janna.

Her breath was knocked out of her body; she gave a strangled whoop as she struggled to suck air into her lungs. She doubled over, breathing quickly, while the child tried to untangle his legs from the hoop, and himself from Janna.

By now they had attracted quite a crowd; everyone pressed in close to see what the fuss was all about, and offer solicitous advice. Someone reached out a hand and hauled the boy to his feet. Probably his mother, Janna thought, for she began to scold him for running off, all the time patting him down and fussing over him with gestures that spoke louder than her words of her concern over the runaway child.

'I 'pologise if he has caused you harm, mistress,' she said then, turning to Janna with an anxious expression. 'But 'twas an accident, no more'n that.'

Janna nodded. She stood up and, still breathless, began to brush the mud and muck from her gown, for she had fallen close to the gutter than ran down the centre of the street. She thought of the meeting with her father, and her spirits sank. Her fine gown had become increasingly shabby since she'd received it as a gift from the abbey; now it had picked up a trace of dung from a passing horse that she hadn't quite managed to avoid as she fell. She almost found it in her heart to wish that her father was still absent, for she did not want to meet him looking so dishevelled and dirty.

'Do not trouble yourself, mistress,' she said, recognising that her efforts to spruce herself up were futile. Annoyed, she couldn't resist bending down so that her head was level with the child. 'And you, you young scoundrel, just watch where you're going in future!'

Shamefaced, he buried his head in his mother's skirts. Janna forced a smile and turned away, searching her heart to forgive him his high spirits. Still feeling somewhat breathless and shaky, she pushed her way through the crowd that had gathered around, and went in search of Ulf. He was holding on to Brutus with some difficulty, for the dog was excited and still barked furiously, and strained against Ulf's tight hold of his ear. As the relic seller noticed Janna, he let go and the dog bounded over and jumped up, almost knocking Janna over again as he gave her face an enthusiastic lick.

'Brutus! Ergh!' Janna pushed the dog away and wiped her face on her sleeve.

'That's one way to clean yourself up,' Ulf observed with a grin. His nose wrinkled as he observed Janna more carefully. 'Would you like him to lick your gown clean too?'

Janna grimaced. 'I'm just wondering if I should throw myself into the river before going to see my father!'

Ulf's smile contracted to a concerned frown. 'I'm sure he'll love you no matter how you look – or smell!'

'Don't!' Janna began a reluctant inspection of her gown to see just how bad the damage was ... and caught her breath in a gasp of terror.

'What?' Ulf grabbed hold of her arm. 'What's wrong?'

Janna didn't answer. She couldn't. She held up the cut cord that once had secured her purse to her girdle. The purse had gone, along with her father's letter and the gifts he had given to her mother: the ring bearing his crest and the brooch with its loving message inscribed on it. She'd lost all the proof that she was who she said she was. Her father was unaware that Eadgyth had given birth to his daughter. How could she hope to convince him of that fact now?

'Christ's bones!' Ulf's shocked exclamation echoed Janna's despair. Recognising that it was probably hopeless, she scanned the crowd just in case she recognised anyone from the group gathered around her and the boy when they fell. That was when it must have happened: some cutpurse taking advantage of the accident, and her inattention. But the group had dispersed. People were going about their business just as usual.

'Did you see anything? Notice anything?'

Janna shook her head. She was still speechless with shock. Not only had she lost her father's gifts, but all the coins she had saved were also gone, the coins that were meant to keep her in comfort at the abbey until her father's arrival.

Everything was gone. Janna closed her eyes, trying to come to terms with the full magnitude of her loss.

Ulf was already searching the crowded street with narrowed eyes, looking for anything untoward, anyone skulking about trying to hide, or making haste away from the scene lest guilt be detected. Janna remembered how casually she had opened her purse to find a coin for the orphans. Had their guardian been watching, deciding even then to help himself to more? Or had someone else been tempted by the bulging purse, thinking there were riches for the picking inside? If so, they would be sadly disappointed for, in truth, Janna had already spent much of what she'd been given, both by a grateful Emma for saving her lover's life and by Robert, Earl of Gloucester, as a reward for her part in unmasking the bishop's treachery. The treasures left in her purse were, for the most part, of value only to her.

And now they were gone! A shroud of misery enveloped Janna. Too stunned even to cry, she wrapped her arms around her body and hugged herself for comfort, to keep herself from flying apart. She had nothing left, nothing to live on and nothing to live for. Nothing to give meaning to her life. The thief had taken less than he thought, but far more than he knew.