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Chapter One

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Lukas Declercq struggled to wake from a deep sleep. There was a heavy weight on his chest and shoulders and a pain at his throat.

At first he thought he was sickening with Grippe or Lung Fever. Then a grating voice hissed in his ear, 'That's right, my fine fellow, open those eyes.'

Lukas could smell putrid breath – an unholy mixture of rotting teeth, garlic and alcohol. He tensed, waiting for the sharp jab of a dagger in his neck.

The man spoke again. 'Give me your money belt, and your clothes, and your sword, and I might spare your life. Any funny business and I'll slit your throat.'

Lukas, wide awake now, could see the grotesque warty face of his tormentor. The man straddled him, a knee on each shoulder. One hand held a knife to his throat, in the other was a lantern. The index finger of both hands had been cut off to ugly stumps – a common punishment for poaching.

He had a weaselly face and a sickly pallor. For an instant Lukas wondered whether to try to shove him off. He was quite tall for his age and his voice had started to deepen. He might be able to beat a man like that in a fight. But then, he was still as thin as a rake. Besides, he could hear other hostile voices. Intuition told him to do as he was told.

'Quick, before I lose my temper,' hissed the man.

It was so cold in the stable Lukas could see his breath in the dim lantern light.

'Move off me then,' he said – and was instantly afraid he had spoken too sharply.

But the man could see the logic in that and sprang up suddenly, quick as a hare. 'Clothes – all of them,' he growled.

'But it's freezing,' pleaded Lukas.

The man jabbed him in the arm with his knife – leaving a shallow cut no longer than a thumbnail. 'Clothes,' he repeated.

Lukas stripped, noticing the blood from his arm was splattering the white tunic he was struggling to remove.

'Breeches,' said the man. 'Stockings.'

Lukas was now stark naked and for a moment he wondered if this man and his accomplices meant to do worse to him than kill him. But the man grabbed his clothes, blanket, money bag and sword and disappeared into the night.

Lukas felt the blood hot against his cold skin. His body was covered in goose pimples and he began to shiver. With the robbers gone, he felt sick with fear and swallowed hard to keep down that evening's stew and dumplings.

The chiming of the monastery clock broke the silence to summon the monks to prayer. Lukas glanced at the night sky. It was still dark outside, with only a glimmer of light on the eastern horizon. He guessed that dawn was still an hour away.

Another voice spoke. 'If we don't find some clothes in the next few minutes, we'll freeze to death.' It was the dark-haired French boy who was a little older than him

– one of the passengers in the wagon who had joined them the day before. He too had been robbed of everything he owned.

They had not spoken much. The boy's name was Etienne Lambert. Lukas knew that much. He had keen eyes and a sharp face. But unlike the other travellers, who would while away the journey in conversation, he said very little, though he listened intently to everyone else. Lukas didn't like him.

'What about the others?' said Lukas. A German man and his wife had also been sleeping in the stable at the monastery, as the wagon had more passengers than the local inn, in the village of Momalle, could hold.

Etienne called their names softly. 'Herr Koberger! Frau Koberger!' but there was no reply. They had chosen a separate stall and, although Lukas and Etienne peered through the gloom, the moonless night made it too dark to do anything other than blunder around. Lukas tripped over a coil of rope and fell, landing heavily on his face. He cursed and said, 'Maybe they've gone for help, or maybe the thieves took them hostage.'

By now both of them were shivering uncontrollably. They glanced fearfully out of the stable door, listening hard. Once satisfied their assailants had left, they ran towards the cloisters, hoping to catch one of the monks on his way to prayer. But the eerie sound of plainsong already filled the night air. Cold as the boys were, neither of them felt they could interrupt the monastery's sacred service by wandering naked into the nave.

'There's a storeroom next to the buttery,' said Etienne. 'I saw one of the monks take a habit from there when we arrived.'

They tried the small wooden door. It creaked open and even in the dimmest light Lukas could see how ramshackle it was, rotten and almost falling off its hinges.

There were no windows to the room and inside was pitch black, so they felt with their hands. 'I think I've got one,' said Etienne. Lukas heard muffled noises as he tried it on. 'Too small,' he heard, and then felt it hit him as the French boy tossed it over. 'Try that.'

Lukas pulled the scratchy woollen garment over his head. 'We'll need two of these each, at least,' he said. 'Otherwise we'll freeze our stones off.' He could feel the chilly air gusting around his legs.

'Never mind that,' said Etienne brusquely. 'Look for some footwear.'

Lukas felt on the floor with his hands and then banged his forehead on the sharp corner of a wooden cabinet. Blood trickled down the side of his face. Biting his lip to stop himself crying out, he lifted the lid and felt inside. His hand brushed against the rough leather of some sandals and he scrabbled through them, trying to find a pair that fitted.

Clad in two habits, Lukas warmed up enough to stop shaking. 'We must find one of the monks, tell them what's happened,' he said.

Etienne shook his head. 'No. The service will go on for at least an hour. Let's get back to the stable and wait there until daybreak. Then we'll tell them.'

As they neared the entrance they heard low, angry voices. 'They're not here. You should have slit their throats. If they recognise us, we'll all be for the wheel.'

Lukas and Etienne froze in their tracks and crept

silently back to the cloisters. They saw four dark shadows emerge from the stable, each clutching a knife. The figures began to walk warily in their direction.

Halfway across the courtyard one of them whispered, 'We can't go searching a whole monastery.' Then he turned and punched the man next to him so hard in the chest he fell to the ground. 'Next time, do a proper job,' he snarled. Another dark shape hauled the whimpering man to his feet and they hurried away.

'I'm not going in there now,' said Lukas.

Etienne nodded. 'They might carry on arguing and come back.'

'I wonder what happened to the German couple,' said Lukas quietly. He had travelled several days with them and had grown to like them. Koberger's cabinet-making business had been thriving, and now he and his wife were taking time off to visit their family back home. She had teased Lukas about his looks, telling him he was a beautiful boy – 'like an angel' – who deserved to be painted by one of the Italian masters.

Etienne shrugged. 'Let's hope they heard them coming and escaped.'

The sound of singing and chanting continued. The two boys found a spot away from the wind and waited out the long hour until dawn, but it was impossible to sleep on the stone floor of the cloisters. When the sky lightened they decided it was safe to return to the stables. Stumbling into the hay, they fell at once into an exhausted sleep.

Lukas woke to the sound of shouting. Someone grabbed hold of him and lifted him to his feet. For a second he thought the robbers had returned, but he

realised that the man yelling in his face was a monk. 'Look!' he said. 'He's got blood on him. And bruises. Look at his face.'

Etienne ran at the monk, knocking him to the ground. Then he grabbed hold of Lukas's sleeve and shouted, 'Run for your life.'

Lukas had no time to think. His instinct told him to run, and they tore past the monastery's outbuildings and winter fields, through the outskirts of the town, and deep into the woods, the early-morning frost crackling beneath their feet and the shouts of their pursuers in their ears.

Etienne gasped, 'If we can find a nook somewhere . . .'

He was breathing so hard he could barely get his words out.

Lukas's lungs were close to bursting. He didn't try to speak. They found a hollow close to a large oak and hurriedly gathered the leaves that had drifted beneath. A fallen branch from a recent storm lay close by and Lukas dragged it over.

'No!' said Etienne, and cursed him. 'They'll follow the marks in the frost.' Lukas should have picked up the branch rather than dragging it.

They hared off again. Their pursuers had gained valuable seconds.

'Quick, over here,' said Etienne, and they jumped down a small slope to another oak. There they lay down in the freezing earth beneath the tree, pulling the cowls of their garments up over their heads and hiding themselves as best they could under a thick covering of leaves. At least their brown monks' habits would blend in with the detritus of the forest floor.

Lukas was sure their winded gasps would betray them. But their pursuers took a while to reach them and by the time they passed both boys were breathing evenly.

'What was . . . ?' he began to say.

Etienne hushed him abruptly, whispering, 'Keep quiet. If you get us caught, I'll kill you.'

They waited in an oppressive silence. Melting frost began to penetrate Lukas's woollen clothing. The cold seeped into his bones and eventually he began to shiver. Braving Etienne's anger again he said, 'I'm freezing to death here.'

But Etienne was calm and reasonable. 'They've gone past us,' he said in a low whisper, 'but they'll be coming back.'

Other voices silenced them at once. Etienne was right. Lukas buried his head in the ground and tried to keep as still as possible. He could guess what the men were doing from the swishing noises that reached them – combing the ground, digging at the bushes and piles of leaves with sticks or branches.

'The spawn of Satan!' they heard one man say. 'They've vanished.' Another voice said, 'It is a punishment from God, visiting these villains upon us.'

The men sounded exhausted and dispirited. Their search was half-hearted. Their voices faded as bright winter sunshine pierced the forest, causing steam to rise from the melting frost.

The boys waited a few more minutes and then cautiously pushed the leaves away. Now Lukas could ask his burning question. 'Why did we have to run?'

'The monks think we killed that German couple,' said Etienne. 'They woke me up, screaming in my face, and

dragged me over to the stall at the end of the stables. They're both there, dead as mutton. Then they wanted to know what I was doing wearing a monk's habit. One of them said it was plain we were going to escape in disguise.'

Lukas could not believe what he was hearing. Questions swam around his head. 'Why couldn't we explain to them what happened?' he said.

Etienne looked exasperated. 'Didn't you see how angry they were?'

Lukas could see there was a logic to it. Everyone in this part of the Low Countries seemed hostile to strangers. Over the past few days, they had been taunted at the roadside by local people thinking them labourers looking for work. Some had even thrown stones or clods of earth at them. Lukas had been frightened, although some of the other travellers in their party had been affronted. They were well-dressed merchants and craftsmen. Not vagrants.

What could they do now? There was certainly no going back to the monastery. Their sole possessions in the world were the stolen clothes they stood up in. They didn't have a penny to their names, and they were both cold and hungry.

Lukas tried to hold in the sob that was rising in his throat. Etienne, on the other hand, looked quite at peace with the world. Dusting off the last of the forest debris he said, 'Well, I'm going that way,' and set off towards the east at a determined pace.

Lukas hurried behind him. 'Wait for me,' he said.

'Why?' said Etienne, but in a way that made Lukas think he was just playing with him.

'Why not?' said Lukas, realising he sounded desperate.

'Because we're fugitives now, and you nearly got us caught,' said Etienne.

Lukas felt even more agitated. 'If we'd stayed and explained to the monks that we had been robbed of all our clothes instead of running away like guilty thieves and murderers, maybe they would have looked after us. If I go back there now, after running away, they'll think I'm giving myself up and it'll be me that's broken on the wheel.'

Etienne winced. 'All right.' He nodded. 'You can come with me to the next town. But you'll have to keep up . . . and after that you're on your own.'