

Prologue

Anno Domini 1160

'I need poison . . . now . . . this very night. Poison that will kill a man for certain, but not too quickly; I can't risk being discovered with him when he dies.' The stranger hesitated. 'It must appear a natural death . . . one that'll arouse no suspicions when the corpse is discovered.'

'But why come to me?' Gunilda protested.

'I was told that if there is anyone in Lincoln, indeed in the whole kingdom, who has the skill to conjure such a substance, it's you.' The man reached across and grasped the edge of Gunilda's skirt, tugging it like a wheedling child. 'There's no one else I can turn to . . . help me, in your mercy . . . I beg of you.'

In the dim mustard light of the guttering tallow candle, Gunilda could see little of the man's expression, but she could hear the desperation in his voice. When a stranger comes knocking at the door of your cottage at the darkest hour of night, you can be certain it is not a cure for warts he's seeking.

The man leaned forward, lowering his voice still further. 'Your knowledge is valuable and the ingredients costly, I've no doubt.' He spread his hands wide. 'I'm a poor man, as you can see. I can't pay in coin. But I do have something that might interest a woman like you, something so rare and precious it is beyond price.'

He reached into the leather scrip hanging from his belt and pulled out a packet the size of his hand, bundled in rags. He began to unwrap it, but Gunilda caught his wrist to stop him. 'Have you any idea what you're asking? I'm not going to help you to kill a man. I don't know what tattle you've been listening to, but I'm a healer, not a murderer. If you've some quarrel to settle, go to any of the alehouses and inns down at the quayside. You'll find a score of men hanging around those places only too eager to slit a man's throat or bludgeon him over the head for nothing more than the price of a flagon of ale.'

The stranger shook his head. 'Don't think I haven't considered that, but this man is a Norman knight, well guarded.

He doesn't roam the streets alone.'

Gunilda snorted. 'And you think that's going to convince me to help you, do you? You're not merely asking me to

murder some old midden-grubber or ship's rat. No, you want me to slaughter a Norman, and a nobleman no less. You're not just moon-touched; you're a gibbering cod-wit. I think you'd better leave now, before you put us both on the gallows for even talking about it.'

But her visitor made no attempt to rise. He leaned forward on the low stool, his face masked by the shadows from the bunches of herbs swinging above his head.

'You don't understand. The man I want to kill is the man who raped my daughter. She's not yet twelve years old. He hurt her, and she's beside herself with terror that he'll return. I can't accuse him without forever defiling her reputation and besides, who would take notice of a poor man like me? If I brought such an accusation against a nobleman, he'd only deny it and the sheriff would believe him. Even if he didn't, what could the sheriff do? Fine him, if that, and then he'd be free to take his revenge on me and, worse still, on her. My child will never be able to sleep without fear until that monster is dead, and he deserves to die for what he's done.'

Gunilda glanced behind her at the small figure of her own daughter curled up asleep under a heap of rags. She was the same age as this man's child. If a man ever touched her daughter, she'd rip his throat out with her own teeth. Any louse who forced himself upon a child deserved more than mere poison.

The man had followed her gaze. 'For my daughter,' he begged.

He continued to unwrap the small package and this time Gunilda made no move to stop him. She gasped when she saw what lay inside.

'Can it be . . . is it genuine?'

But she didn't need him to answer that question for as soon as she took it in her bare hands she could feel it stirring to life. It was a black and twisted thing, a shrivelled root, shaped like a human with a body, two arms, two legs and a face as wrinkled as time itself. A mandrake! A genuine mandrake and here in her own hands. He was right; it was a creature beyond price.

'How did you come by this?'

'I . . . acquired it in the Holy Land, when I fought for the Cross.'

Gunilda knew that some blood-soaked tale must lurk behind that careful word *acquired*, but she didn't press him. There are some answers no one wants to utter or hear.

The stranger was watching her intently. ‘So you will give me the poison . . . for the mandrake?’

Gunilda hesitated. It wouldn’t be the first time she’d helped a man to die, though mostly it was some poor soul who, racked with pain or misery beyond enduring, begged her to help them speed their passing. They all came to her, those who could not afford the exorbitant fees of the apothecaries and physicians. She was well loved for her cures, and feared for her curses. But, though the physicians ranted against her, she did only good to the innocent and harm to the evil, so she was mostly left in peace.

Finally she rose. ‘What he’s done to your daughter he’ll doubtless do to others. For their sakes – to prevent a greater evil – I’ll give you what you need.’

Before the Nocturn bell had finished sounding from the priory, the stranger had slipped out into the stinking alley, a phial of poison safely lodged in his scrip where the mandrake had nestled.

Gunilda sat in front of the fire cradling the tiny creature in her hands, feeling the flutter of life beneath her fingers, the throbbing power rising up through her hands.

‘What did he give you?’ A sleepy little face appeared at her side.

Gunilda hugged her daughter tightly to her, thinking of another child. Then she held up the mandrake. ‘It’s something I’ve only ever dreamed of possessing. It has the power to cure every ill if used well, even to turn back curses upon the sender.’

‘Can I hold it?’ her daughter asked.

Gunilda shook her head. ‘It’s too dangerous; first you must learn how to use it well. Used wrongly, it can bring death and worse. I’ll teach you all its secrets one day, but there is plenty of time for that. Go back to sleep now.’

Gunilda wrapped the mandrake carefully again and hid it in the darkest corner of the cottage, in the hollow under a stone in the floor where they kept their coins, on the rare occasions they were ever paid with money. She lay down beside her daughter, smoothing her hair and singing softly until she felt the child relax and heard the rhythmic breathing which signified sleep. Then she closed her own eyes. She slept without guilt for the nobleman whose death sentence she had signed. One tyrant less in the world was a blessing.

At dawn, nearly two weeks later, Gunilda was again awakened by a knocking at her door, but this time the visitors did not

wait for her to answer it. Before she had even struggled upright, the door was kicked in and soldiers were pouring into the tiny cottage. Her daughter screamed and fought the men as they dragged Gunilda from her hearth, but they pushed the child to the ground, kicking her until she curled up into a ball and lay sobbing. The soldiers lashed Gunilda's wrists to a horse's tail and ran her up the great hill to the cathedral. She could hear her little daughter crying and calling out to her as, bruised and battered, she toiled up Steep Hill behind her mother. Gunilda recognized only one man in the crowd who awaited her outside the cathedral, the stranger who had come in the night to her cottage. But he was not clad in a poor man's garb any more. And now it seemed he had a name, a name she would remember to her grave and beyond – Sir Warren. With trembling hand Warren pointed to Gunilda and feigned to weep as he betrayed her.

It took a while for Gunilda to understand the charge which had been brought against her, but eventually they told her that Sir Warren's wife was dead. The death had not been marked as suspicious at first. The deceased had been placed in her coffin while messengers went out to recall her poor grieving husband from London and to summon her brother from Winchester for her funeral, which, given her wealth, was to be a lavish affair.

But when Warren installed his comely, and obviously pregnant, young mistress in the house before his wife's coffin was even laid in the tomb, his brother-in-law began to suspect foul play. He insisted on the coffin being opened in the presence of witnesses. Despite the outraged protests from Warren and the parish priest, he commanded the tiring maids to lift the dead woman's clothes as he searched the body for the marks of violence he was certain he would find. He looked for stab wounds, bruises from strangulation, bumps on the head, but there was nothing.

He was about reluctantly to admit he had been mistaken, when a clerk pointed to the heap of maggots that had fallen to the bottom of the coffin as the clothes were disturbed.

The woman had been dead a few days, so at first none but the clerk could see anything amiss in discovering maggots feasting on the corpse. Until, that is, the clerk pointed out that the maggots were no longer feasting; they were as dead as their dinner. And the unfortunate pig which was fed a morsel of the corpse's liver, the hounds having refused it, likewise sickened and died the next day. There could be no

doubt; Warren's wife had been poisoned.

Although the brother now had evidence of his sister's murder, proving that his brother-in-law was the murderer was not so easy. Warren had been engaged on urgent business in London when his wife had died, and furthermore he swore that before he left, his wife told him she was intending to send for Gunilda to cure her of some woman's malady. No husband in the land could be expected to define precisely what a woman's problem might be. So no one questioned him further on this point.

A quaking servant in turn swore that he'd seen Gunilda visiting his mistress the very day she died. Gunilda denied it, of course, but who could she call upon to confirm her story that Warren had visited her? A nobleman, a Norman, creeping to her hovel in the night – it was a preposterous idea.

Gunilda was tried by ordeal of fire. She was forced, in front of the clergy, to carry a red-hot iron bar for ten paces.

Afterwards her hand was bound and a seal put upon the wrappings and she was left to lie in the Bishop's dungeon for three days. Her daughter was permitted to stay with her, and for those three days, despite her mother's agony, they whispered and talked and slept little. There were so many secrets Gunilda had to entrust to her daughter, so much knowledge and so little time left. Just a few hours before, Gunilda believed she had years left to pass on all her skills to her child, now she knew she had only three days and three nights.

For Gunilda was certain of what they would discover beneath the bandages on the third day. There was no use hoping for a miracle. If she'd had time, a warning before the ordeal, she could have protected herself. She'd saved many others from the gallows over the years, for she could make unguents, almost invisible to the eye, which, painted on to the hand, would protect it from serious burns and help the skin to heal rapidly. But there had been no time to anoint herself. When the seal was broken and the priest removed the bandages, the raw, festering wound proclaimed her guilt. The sentence was death by burning with the mercy of strangulation before the flames reached her, if she confessed.

She did confess. The falsehood made no difference now; she couldn't save her life, so why die in agony? She didn't fear going to the life beyond with a lie weighing down her immortal soul, for neither she nor her sobbing daughter believed in the merciful God in whose name these men were murdering her. Gunilda trusted in the old ways, the old goddesses of earth and water, fire and blood, and it was in their name that,

with her dying breath, she cursed Warren and the unborn child his mistress carried, cursed every child that would ever spring from his loins.

Her daughter, alone now, quite alone, watched the body of her mother fired to ashes and smelt the stench of her mother's roasting flesh. No longer weeping now, she stood, aflame with hatred, as the white dust of her mother was carried up by the wind and fell soft as snowflakes upon her own dark hair.