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## CHAPTER ONE

### *Motte*

I should remember everything that happened that morning, every tiny jot, but I can't. I'll just have to imagine. My mother-in-law Licoricia would've been sat in her big green chair like usual, waving apples at my little boys, Leo and Hame, to steal their eyes from me. Not that I'd have minded as I'd have been glad to have a rest from them. Or she'd have started on about what a good man her husband Elias was, going off to work before the sun was up. That had a barb in it like most of Licoricia's talk did, and meant 'my husband's a far better man than any of the idle lollers in your family'. Which was a black lie. Just because mine weren't rich like hers didn't mean they were idle.

Then came one thing that I do remember. Besse the maid was about to go out and get our morning bread when my sister Rosa told her no, she'd go as she felt like taking a little walk. 'Une petite marche,' she'd have said. I might have wondered about it, I probably did, but I didn't say anything. Then I'd have been distracted. Leo was new on his feet, running and squealing till he'd fall down and cry, Hame was two years older and they were like two fish hooks, snagging my attention. Or I'd have been fretting about Benedict, my husband, who was up in Lincoln, where he'd gone to make new silver ends for

the synagogue scrolls. He'd left just before the new troubles, we'd had no word for weeks and my heart missed a beat every time someone came knocking at the door.

All the while I'd have felt the moments passing by, till I thought Rosa's taking her time. It's not far to the baker's so she should be back by now. Then I'd have told myself, stop worrying, Motte. There's probably a big crowd in the bakery, as there often is at this hour, and she's had to wait. Until so long had gone by that even if all of Pharaoh's army were in there getting loaves she should've been back. Then I'd have said, lightly like I wasn't much bothered, 'I wonder where Rosa's got to? I might go out and take a look.' Of course Licoricia would've seen through that clear as through a pane of glass. 'Let's hope your sister hasn't run off again,' she'd have said, casting me a woeful look, as if to say, your family's nothing but trouble. In her heart she'd have been pleased, as with me out of the house she'd have my boys all to herself to spoil. And then there's the one thing that I wish I remember so bad that it burns me. When I went to get my cloak and my purse, did Hame run up and grab me, like he sometimes did when I was going out, squealing and laughing and saying I must stay, and did Leo, not wanting to be left out, totter over and do the same?

After that I remember it all better. That would have been from my anguish I dare say, as there's nothing like fright to keep something in the mind forever. I walked over to the baker's, thinking I was a daft fool for worrying, and sure I'd see Rosa walking back through the crowds towards me, a loaf under her arm, giving me an aggrieved look for chasing after her. But no, here I was by the baker's and there wasn't a hair

of her. There were only one or two bodies inside, and when I asked, 'Have you seen my sister Rosa?' the baker shook his head. So Licoricia had been right and she'd run off again. I was breathing faster then, scared and angry for her both at the same time. What if someone knew her face from the Jewry? I just hoped she hadn't gone all the way outside the city again. But she probably had. Last time she'd gone to Camberwell so I set off south across West Cheap.

The way took me past Everard the candlemaker, who was one of my father-in-law Elias's borrowers, and who knew Rosa, so I went in to ask. Everard was stirring a big steaming pot of fat that made the walls shine and filled the place with stink, while his boy was beside him ready to chuck in some more. Everard wasn't the friendliest so I suppose I should've known how it would go. 'Yes?' he said, giving me a look. 'There's not a farthing I owe as I paid up yesterday.' When I said I was looking for Rosa he gave a shrug. 'I haven't seen her.' But then his boy, who was milder, said, 'I think I did. Just now. I saw her through the door, walking by outside the shop.' When I asked which way she'd been going he pointed south, like I'd hoped he wouldn't.

Damn her, I'd have thought. That pitiless, singular child looking only to her own self. I pressed on to the bridge, which, like always, was tight with folk squeezing by. I wasn't halfway across when I heard someone call out, 'Look who's coming down the river,' and people started pushing into a space between the shops to peer down. Though it made no sense, as how could it be her, just for a moment I thought, what if it's Rosa, and I squeezed through them to see. But no, thanks be to God, when I looked over I saw there were

a pair of them, just about to slip under the bridge, both so swollen that they looked almost like playing balls. One had half his face gone and another had no head. ‘I wonder whose they are,’ said one of the crowd, ‘Montfort’s or the king’s?’ ‘The king’s,’ said another, ‘see how fat they are,’ which made the rest laugh. ‘Some of his Frenchmen,’ said a third. ‘Or his Jews.’ Which got another laugh. Somebody had found a big piece of stone and he lobbed it over, catching the headless one on the chest so he vanished under for a moment before bobbing up again, which got a cheer. No one was looking at me, thank heavens, and I edged back out of the crowd.

Reaching the Tower at the far end of the bridge I asked the guard, ‘I’m searching for my sister. Have you seen her go out? Black hair, green eyes, pretty-looking.’ Some of them can know you from half a mile off, don’t ask me how, it’s like they can smell you, and this guard was one. He gave me a look, not friendly, to show it. ‘See how many people go by here? As if I’d know.’ When I was small my father used to tell me, ‘Motte, when things look bad, as they will some days, remember this. For every unkindness there’s a courtesy, and for every wicked man there’s a good one too,’ and so it was that morning. I got out of the stream of folk and was standing there, wondering what to do, when I saw that a beggar, who was sat in a niche just out of the throng, was waving me over. He’d have heard me talking to the guard. ‘I saw her,’ he said. ‘A pretty thing. She had a funny look to her, sort of dreamy. I wondered if she was drunk.’

That was Rosa all right. I gave him a farthing and my thanks and then looked out through the gate towards Southwark. Just because she’d gone out there didn’t mean I

had to go after her. But of course it did. I couldn't turn my back on my own sister, however undeserving. So, though every ounce of me hungered to go back the way I'd come, I walked through the gate and into Southwark. I just hoped she'd chosen the same spot she had last time, as otherwise I'd never find her in a hundred months and I'd be risking myself for nothing.

At least there shouldn't be many who'd know me out here, or so I hoped. Back in the house they'd be wondering where I'd got to, as I'd said I'd only be gone for a short while. I'd never forgive Licoricia if she got my little mites in a scare, which I could see her doing, just to make me look bad. I started down the Kent road. The way was crowded with walkers and riders, most of them going back towards London, and I could see the care on their faces. They'd be Montfort's, frightened they'd be caught by some of the king's. Montfort's were worse. Not that the king's were much better. I kept my face low, looking down at the ground, in case one of them might sniff me out like the guard on the bridge.

It was further than I remembered but finally I saw the tower of Camberwell church and then there she was. I swear she was in the very same spot she'd been the last time, sat on a tree root by the pond. For a moment I felt joy that I'd found her but that soon slipped away. I stepped up behind her and, not loud but hissing out the words, I said, 'Vous trueie.' She twisted round then, her eyes open wide, at the vous, at being called sow, there being nothing worse, and most of all at the cold sound of my voice. 'How could you?' I said. 'And now of all times.' She gave me a pleading look. 'Motte, please. I meant to get the loaf like I said, but then. . . I just can't stand

that house. I miss our home.' 'Come on,' I told her, tugging her arm hard so she winced. 'Let's get back.'

Even then she was slow. I'd take a few paces and she'd be straggling behind me, looking at a cat lying on a wall or at some ducks flying by, or a tree in blossom. 'I never see any green,' she moaned, like I was being unfair making her hurry up. 'You won't see anything at all if you don't come on,' I told her. Finally we got to Southwark but I'd hardly had a chance to feel joy when I saw there was a crowd up ahead and I heard shouting. Rosa was in her dreams like usual and didn't notice till we'd almost reached the Tower. 'I don't understand,' she said. 'Why's the gate shut?' 'Because you're slow and only think of yourself,' I answered. Then I wished I hadn't as she started crying and people were looking at us, which was the last thing I wanted. Someone called out to the guards on the Tower asking them to open up but they didn't even bother to answer, and then I heard someone saying there was talk of conspirators with a secret purpose to let King Henry's men into London and that was why the gates had been closed.

That didn't sound good to me. Sure enough, we waited through half the day, but when the light began to fade and the gates were still closed I cursed my sister for the tenth time and led us back into Southwark to find an inn. And though they doubled their prices, like they always did when a crowd was locked out, I had just enough in my purse for us both, thanks be to God. The place was dirty like they were and as we ate our sops I was sure some of the other eaters at our table were casting us looks, as if they knew us. That night I got hardly a moment's sleep. Every time I nodded off I'd come awake with a start, hearing voices in the street below, or

someone riding by, and then I'd be waiting for the sound of footsteps thumping up the stairs. I prayed to God seven score times, not aloud but just opening my mouth without making a sound, please preserve us, I beg you. Or I beseeched Hame and Leo, please forgive me for being such a fool and going out of the city after my sister, and I entreated God, don't let them lose their mother when they're still just babies.

I must've dropped off in the end, though, because I found myself awake, it was fully light and looking round I saw half the beds in the dormitory were already empty. I got up and leaned out of the window and saw people hurrying by below, and sure enough when I craned my neck I saw the gate to the bridge was open. 'Come on, up you get,' I said to Rosa, giving her a smile, as my anger at her was all gone now. Down we went and as I stepped through the gateway, for the first time since I'd left the house the day before I felt my breath come out slow and calm. There was the same beggar in his spot so I pointed to Rosa and said, 'See, I found her.' He just looked at the ground like he hadn't heard. Still I didn't think anything of it. But then, just after, I passed the same unfriendly guard whom I'd asked the day before and I saw the look he gave us.

'I'm hungry,' said Rosa. 'There must be somewhere we can get something?' I got her wrist and pulled it sharp so she let out a little cry. 'Why d'you do that?' she bleated. I didn't answer but pulled her again. We'd hardly started over the bridge when I smelt smoke. The further we got, and the closer to Jews' Street, the stronger it was. It was strange, though. As we walked, I could feel my heart beating fast, but still things felt so usual. I thought, just keep going and do what you must. When I turned the corner to our street and I saw it was



all gone, and that where our house had been, where they'd all been, there were stumps of timbers, fallen beams and the stubs of stone fireplaces, all black, I just thought, well, that's no surprise. It's what you thought it would be. It was still smoking and I could feel the heat. In the road there was a heap of things – a stool missing a leg, a broken mirror, a dead dog. Rosa let out a kind of whimper. 'But. . .'

Do what you can, do what you must. Don't ask me why but I thought, Everard the candlemaker, he'll know. So back we went. The door to his shop was open but he wasn't boiling fat today. There was no sign of him and I had to call three times before he and his boy came in from the back. When they saw us they stopped still for a moment like we were a pair of ghosts. Then Everard righted himself. 'Yes?' he said, unfriendly like usual. His boy had a black eye and was looking at us as if he might cry. Another thing was their clothes, which I'd never seen them wearing before. They were too good for work clothes and they didn't fit right. Everard's shirt was long in the sleeves as his hose were too big. 'Where are they all?' I asked. Now Everard was almost friendly. 'They'll be over in the Tower,' he said. 'That's what I heard.'

So Rosa and me started out for the Tower. We'd only gone a couple of streets when I sat down on a doorstep, dropping down heavy like a sack. 'Why have you stopped?' asked Rosa. 'They're not there,' I said, not crying because it was like there was nothing in me, even to cry. 'I know they're not. They're all gone. I saw it in Everard's eyes.' Rosa sat beside me on the doorstep. 'You can't be sure,' she said. 'We have to find out. Come on, get up.' And so I did.