

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE MISCHIEF MOON

“Girls are stupid!”

The chatter in the tavern was silenced and all eyes turned to the corner by the door where the gloom was so fond of loitering. Gratified by the reaction his words provoked, young Tam Norvik repeated them with greater gusto.

“Girls *are* stupid,” he insisted. “They’re dizzy and weak and they have squeaky voices!”

The landlord of the Worm Tooth Tavern strode across to confront this outburst of plain speaking. His shoulders ranged about his neck in mountains of brawn and eclipsed the murky candlelight. He folded his arms and the boulders of his biceps strained at the stitching on his rolled up shirt sleeves.

“Tam, my dear little brother,” the big man spoke with a rumble of doom rock-sliding through his voice, “would you mind keeping your noise down? It’s Ladies’ Night, and my customers don’t need to hear that kind of talk with their gin and bingo. Why don’t you go outside and get some fresh air?”

“Why don’t you go and stick your head in the toilet?” Tam smirked back. “It might cover up the smell of your aftershave.”

Tam knew he was pushing his luck. Jed did not like being shown up in front of his ladies. But Tam was in a gobby mood tonight. What could Jed do anyway, smack him? Not with witnesses around he couldn’t – and certainly not while he was trying to work his charm on his bingo hags.

Jed carried himself with a heroic poise in everything he did, whether he was flirting in the pub lounge or rinsing out the spit bowls. He was the kind of man who seemed destined to have his likeness carved into marble someday – although he didn’t look quite as chiselled as he used to. A girdle of flab around his midriff stretched out his barman’s apron like bread dough ballooning under a teacloth. The days when he used to dare his mates to punch him in the gut for bar bets were long gone. But he still had his steel blue eyes, his dimpled chin, his spit curled raven hair and, of course, his shiny silver medal of valour pinned on him by the king himself, as he never got tired of boasting. So he still got plenty of come-hither glances from the ladies.

But his most striking feature, the one that really made the ladies go weak at the ankles, was something he had acquired only recently. It was a hook hand fashioned from a genuine dragon’s tooth. It was a flat triangular fang, curved at the point, as broad as a cleaver and longer than a bread knife. There were intricate designs carved all over the surface of this monstrous ivory that served as a faithful record of Jed’s military service: all the battles he had fought, all the dragons he had slain and all the girlfriends he had dumped.

Tam imagined, rightly so, that most people would be quite upset at the loss of a hand, but not so his big brother. He appeared to revel in the fact that his greatest trophy from the war was now a part of his body, and he never missed an opportunity to show off and pose around with it, especially on a night like this with the pub heaving with tipsy war widows. Jed’s favourite party trick was to slice the tops off a line of beer bottles with a single swing of his hook before he poured out the drinks for his fawning biddies. He had just been on the verge of breaking his record of thirteen bottles in a row when his focus was flummoxed by Tam’s daring proclamation about feminine intellect.

Besides being good for impressing the ladies, Jed's hook hand proved quite versatile when it came to the everyday chores at the tavern: He could chop wood with it, unblock the loo and slice up meat for the lunchtime sandwiches. But the pressing task to which Jed needed to apply the hook right now was the disposal of one obnoxious younger sibling whose big loud mouth was cramping his style.

Jed snagged the boy by the scruff of his shirt and flung him out through the door like a sack of garbage. Tam sprawled onto the pavement to the sound of the ladies cheering. He stood up and spat out something very unflattering about his brother's hairy lard arse. But the door was already slammed shut and Jed could no longer hear him above the squeals of his hags and the flapping of their bingo wings. Tam wiped his nose on his sleeve and skulked off into the night.