FERNPEOPLE

 CHAPTER 1

AN UNACCEPTABLE DECISION

Five pregnant sheep stood uneasily under a tree, staring toward the nearby farmhouse. Early morning light was slowly taking over their part of Montaland, the mountain world. It was usually a peaceful time, even for the noisy family who lived in the farmhouse, but this morning shouts burst out of the windows, shouts that got louder and louder until they abruptly stopped. Then the sound of somebody crying could be heard.

 The largest of the ewes began waddling away, her enormous body indicating twins, if not triplets. The other three followed, stomachs swinging from side to side, as they got as far from the disturbance as the small pasture allowed.

 They were just in time. The front door of the farmhouse slammed as a boy left. It popped open again right away, and a young man leaned out of the doorway.

“You owe me, Benk.”

“I WHAT?” Benk yelled, spinning around. He was the baby of the family, which he hated, and short for an eleven-year-old, which he also hated, and he didn’t owe Alland anything.

“How many times have I taken you on camping trips? How many times have I let you off sheep duty while you did your woods thing?”

Benk glared. Seven years ago their father had died and Alland had quit school to keep the sheep farm running. He’d also acted as makeshift father to his youngest brother, but that was beside the point. *Woods thing!*

“I’m going to be a scout, like Petten. I need to learn about the woods. Besides, you made Mom cry.”

“She’s wrong about Alissa,” his brother said shortly.

“Is that a fact? Alissa’s a princess, for high home’s sake! Everything would change if she came—but she won’t, so it’s a waste of time to ask her.”

“If you don’t think she’ll come, why not humor me?” Alland shot back. “The others agreed to start the spring planting, and I’ll be back before we need to shear. The only thing I’m asking you to do is take care of the sheep for a week, especially the ewes that haven’t given birth yet.”

“Yeah, like that’s such an easy job,” grumbled Benk.

“It’s not easy, but you can do it.”

“So go already if you have to learn the hard way.” Benk turned and stomped out of the yard.

“Thanks,” Alland called after his little brother, who ignored him and kept stomping until he reached the far pasture where the main flock of sheep was grazing.

Two weeks ago, the cold white of winter had disappeared. One day the trees seemed dead; the next day they were covered with small, fragile-looking leaves that grew quickly, fluttering in the breezes until the mountains rippled with a thousand shades of green. Birds built nests; pastures sprouted grass; his mother opened windows. It was spring and it was good!

“Now this,” Benk said angrily.

He was standing with his back to the sheep, his attention focused on the top of the nearest hill. A head appeared, then a body, and even from that distance he could see there was a lot of huffing and puffing as the person crested the hill.

 “Target spotted,” he muttered under his breath and hurried across the grass, swinging over the fence when he reached it. A path ran through the woods close to the pasture, and Benk positioned himself behind a bush. A few minutes later, a twig broke under someone’s foot.

 “Target approaches,” he whispered, but he wasn’t enjoying himself as much as he usually did. The issue at hand was too serious.

 A sixteen-year-old girl came into view, breathing loudly. Her long brown hair was tied back with a piece of string. No doubt, she’d been in too much of a hurry to find a ribbon, but Benk knew she didn’t care what she looked like on her morning walks. “I’m going to get hot and sweaty. Nobody looks good when they’re hot and sweaty—except Alissa, of course.”

Benk’s face hardened. *Now*.He sprang onto the path.

“You’ve got to stop Alland!”

 The ensuing scream ricocheted off the hills and echoed slightly before fading away. Benk stared impatiently at his victim who had jumped backward, lost her footing, and sat down hard on the path. Fun was over; it was time for business.

 Startled green eyes stared back at him until they focused. Then they narrowed into angry green eyes. “BENK! You have GOT to quit DOING that,” Janna shrieked as she did every time, but Benk didn’t respond with his usual unrepentant grin.

 “He’s borrowed a horse so he can go with you this morning, and he’s planning to bring Alissa back with him. As his wife. To live in the farmhouse. With us.” He spat out the words in short phrases as if they left a bad taste in his mouth.

 “He can’t be serious. That is so wrong,” Janna sputtered.

Benk relaxed slightly. He could count on Janna. She was as violently opposed to anything serious developing between Alissa and Alland as he was. Furthermore, she was Alissa’s closest friend. That gave her influence.

 “He can’t go with us if I refuse to let him,” Janna said next, and Benk nodded. That was the right attitude, though he knew Alland would pay no attention to their nearest neighbor, even if she was the only princess in the Kingdom of Mount Pasture.

 “He says he’ll go by himself if he has to.”

 Janna knew Alland too. She grimaced and stated the facts.

“He won’t pay any attention to me. He’s never been to the Kingdom of Green Water, so he doesn’t know the way, but he’ll follow if we don’t let him go with us.”

Her eyes narrowed again. “Where is he right now?”

 “He was on his way to the castle when I left.”

Janna sprang up and swatted the dirt off the back of her skirt. “I’ll stop him,” she said and marched off.

 It wasn’t easy to nod approvingly and shake his head at the same time, but Benk managed. He approved of Janna, but she had her limitations.

*So do you!*

Now where had that come from? Benk pushed the unwelcome comment away and plotted his next move. It didn’t take long to pick a place. He knew every inch of the woods in this part of Mount Pasture. Twenty minutes later, he had arrived at the chosen site and settled, prepared to wait no matter how long it took.

\*\*\*\*\*\*

Janna fumed as she hurried along the path toward home.

She had taken an early morning walk for four years, ever since she’d escaped from the Fern Queen’s castle with Alissa and Petten. At first the walk had been beyond hard. Now it was easy—except for the last hill, the steepest on her route. She always wheezed her way up the final few feet of that hill and took a short break at the top to catch her breath. This morning, she’d been too excited to take her normal break. She was leaving the Kingdom of Mount Pasture right after breakfast to visit Alissa.

The morning had been bright with promise until Alland had ruined it. The crush he had on Alissa had to end. This time it really had to end.

“Petten should have married her,” Janna grumbled, but nothing had come of her matchmaking efforts in that direction. The scout had shown interest at one point and then backed off, while Alissa had never cared for him in that way, not like she cared for—

 Janna’s stomach rumbled, stopped as if to catch its breath, then rumbled again, and Janna, who didn’t like the direction her thoughts were going, gladly accepted the interruption. She was hungry. She wanted one of her mother’s big breakfasts, but Cook had been in charge of the castle kitchen for three and a half years now. They usually had oatmeal, milk with the cream skimmed off, a small bowl of fruit, and one slice of toast apiece, with a pat of butter grudgingly allowed each plate.

 “I’m hot. I’m hungry. I’m mad—and it’s all Alland’s fault.”

Five minutes later, Janna reached the castle’s yard with its towering oak trees. She trudged through it to the front door, open as it always was in mild weather. Voices were traveling down the hall from the dining room, and Alland’s voice was one of them. Janna started moving fast again, a frown on her face. She needed to wash up and change clothes. Thankfully, her saddlebags were already packed and by the front door.

The aroma of coffee met her as she rushed back down the stairs, swiping at her hair with a brush, which she threw in the general direction of her saddlebags. When she entered the dining room, Alland was seated at the table, sipping coffee with her mother and father.

“Here you are,” King Luff greeted her heartily.

“Oh, Janna, the best news—Alland’s going to travel to the Kingdom of Green Waters too. That’ll be one more person to protect you,” her mother said.

Janna slid into her chair and eyed the young man across from her. He was nineteen. Shepherds often married earlier than that, but he was a year younger than Alissa, while Petten was a year older, which was more in line with the old story romances. Too bad Petten had let her down, but enough of that. She had maneuvering to do.

“I don’t need extra protection. There are three grown men taking me to the Kingdom of Green Waters. Alland should stay at home with his sheep. Spring is no time for a shepherd to leave his flock.” She put a deeply concerned expression on her face.

Cook interrupted Janna’s display of concern by wheeling in the breakfast trolley. Luff transferred the dishes to the table while the older woman took her seat and everyone else stared hungrily at the food. *Oatmeal and skim milk*, Janna noted sadly. At least there was a whole platter of toast. That was because Alland was there. Company always made a difference, even pushy next-door neighbors who made a habit of visiting at mealtimes. *Hey, what’s in that jar? Blackberry jam! BLACKBERRY**JAM!*

 While Janna was making this momentous discovery, her father was thinking over what she’d said. She had counted on just that. Luff was in charge of a large kingdom full of shepherds, and he took his responsibility seriously.

“I didn’t think of the time of year. It is still lambing season, Alland. If you think you shouldn’t—”

Berta spoke up stoutly, “I want him to go. I’m nervous every time Janna leaves Mount Pasture. She was taken prisoner by that awful Fern Queen, you remember. Alland would be one more grown-up along to protect her.”

Janna snorted at the word “grown-up” when applied to Alland.

“The Fern Queen’s dead. So are all the fernpeople except for Cook, and she doesn’t count anymore since the Maker healed her. There’s nothing between Mount Pasture and Green Waters but trees,” she told her mother. She couldn’t help saying it with a slightly superior air. Her mother worried too much.

Luff cleared his throat disapprovingly, so Janna added, “Okay, maybe some squirrels,” though she knew her dad was objecting to her attitude toward her mother, not her list of dangers. Honestly, even he had to know his wife worried too much. Everyone in the kingdom knew it. Berta was a big-time bleater.

“My brothers and sisters can handle things while I’m gone. The older ones will start the planting, while Benk watches the sheep and takes care of any difficult births,” Alland said calmly.

“BENK? You expect BENK to stick his hand up a ewe’s—”

“Not at the table!” her mother interrupted quickly.

Alland said in a firm voice, “He can do it. I’m going to Green Waters, Janna. Whether I’m part of your group or following it, I’m going. This time my sheep don’t come first.”

There was a glint in the young shepherd’s eyes that made Janna scowl; however, her mother and father were busily assuring their guest that the traders who were taking Janna to Green Pastures would be happy to include him. She might as well quit arguing. Alland would go with them whether she liked it or not, but she’d talk to him on the way. Oh yes, she’d talk to him, and it was Janna who had a glint in her eyes this time.

Luff and Berta visibly relaxed when she quit protesting. Everyone ate their oatmeal with hungry zeal and then reached for the toast.

“Extra’s for Alland,” Cook commented.

Janna watched as her parents sighed deeply and took the one piece allotted to them. Alland took several and dug deeply into the blackberry jam, three pairs of eyes watching him enviously. They weren’t allowed jam. It wasn’t fair.

“Is there cream for Alland’s coffee, Cook? I’m sure he’d rather have cream than milk,” cooed Berta.

Cook glanced suspiciously across the table. Berta usually got such things herself. Nevertheless, the older woman didn’t mind the errand and pushed herself up and out to the kitchen. As soon as she left the room, Luff and Berta dived for the toast and jam.

 “A fine thing when you have to sneak food in your own house,” Luff grumbled as he folded his piece into a jam sandwich and ate it in two bites.

 Cook didn’t make it back. “The traders are here,” she called from the kitchen and everything was hustle and confusion for a few minutes. Finally, Berta and Luff hugged Janna goodbye. When Cook stepped up for her turn, the older woman held the younger one close. No one except for Janna and maybe Berta knew how much the girl meant to her.

“Say hi to Alissa for me.”

 “I will,” Janna told her.

“I’ll be back before you know I’m gone,” she told her parents.

 *Hooray, we’re off*, she told herself.

 The horses trotted briskly up and down a sunny hill before rounding a curve, which brought Janna’s favorite section of the northbound road into view. Large trees grew on either side of it, with wide branches that met overhead, forming a long stretch of road that was not only beautiful but also five degrees cooler.

As soon as they entered the shaded corridor, a breeze blew through the trees overhead, rustling the leaves. One of the traders raised his head, stared at the interlocking branches, and then beamed. Janna was surprised but pleased. She had known these men her whole life, and they had never impressed her as appreciators of beauty. They did travel quite a bit though and must see many—

 “No worm nests,” the man observed and the other two traders nodded.

 “That’s good. Had to burn ’em out at my place.”

“Aagh,” Janna gurgled in disgust.

Alland chuckled, which was a mistake on his part as far as Janna was concerned. She turned to wither him with a scathing comment, but instead of withering anyone, Janna screamed for the second time that morning.

\*\*\*\*\*\*

Benk was more impatient this time. He hadn’t been well hidden. They should have seen him before he stepped out into the road. Petten would have spotted him, and Benk felt better at the mere thought of his hero.

“You shouldn’t leave,” he said to his brother.

“Why?” Alland asked as he patted his horse’s neck to assure it that the person who had darted from behind a tree wasn’t dangerous.

“BENK, you have GOT to stop DOING that!” Janna shrieked.

Both brothers ignored her.

“Why don’t you want me to go?” Alland asked again when Benk stayed silent.

Benk glowered at him. “I don’t want to take care of those pregnant ewes. You ought to stay home and do it.”

“You’ve watched me help ewes give birth. What’s the problem?”

“I couldn’t see what you were doing once your hand went in.”

“Are you afraid?” his older brother asked bluntly.

Janna’s jaw dropped. The traders stared in wide-eyed amazement. The word “fear” had never been used in the same sentence with Benk.

“You’ve never been afraid of anything. Why this?”

Benk didn’t answer.

“I wouldn’t leave you in charge of those ewes if I didn’t think you could handle it. In fact, you should have an easier time than I do because your hand and arm are smaller.”

There was silence for a long minute.

“Don’t go,” Benk finally pleaded and then clamped his mouth shut.

Alland shook his head firmly. “I’ve got to. Chances are none of the ewes will have problems, but even if they do and we lose all five of them and their lambs, I’ve got to go.”

Benk could see Janna out of the corner of an eye. Her mouth had opened wide enough to swallow one of the ewes in question. He didn’t respond to his brother; neither did he nod or shake his head. He just turned and disappeared into the woods, but the back of his neck was red. He could feel it.

He’d never forgive Alland for this. Never.