
THE TREASON OF ROBYN HOOD

D LIEBER



CHAPTER ONE

Robyn left Lackland Steel as fast as she could when the shift whistle screeched. She didn't even bother to change out of her overalls; she just grabbed her bag from the locker room and punched her time-card on the way out.

As the sound of the city streets slammed into her, she forced it to dim into the background. Car horns blared at each other, their drivers trying to navigate the evening rush to get home, or wherever they were going. The sky glowed yellow as the sun unsuccessfully struggled to cut through the smog. She adjusted the scarf over her face as she passed under the train's overpass, wrinkling her nose at the smell of rusty iron.

She followed the elevated train tracks with her eyes as they crossed over each other, all eventually ending at Central Station. She climbed the platform just as her train hummed into the station. It hovered lower than some of the newer lines, and she had to step down to board.

An older woman beside Robyn clicked her tongue, eyeing her with disapproval. Robyn looked down at her hands, which still had soot and oil from the steel mill crusted in the

creases of her knuckles and stuck around her fingernails. She stared out the window as the city passed by, too impatient to care about her appearance and how others saw her.

Robyn didn't glance back at the reprovng woman as she stepped off the train. She fought the flow of the crowd as they hurried in the opposite direction. After much elbowing and a few sore toes, theirs not hers, Robyn managed to escape the crush and distance herself from the train station.

Her boots made little sound on the sidewalk as she took the longest strides her five-and-a-half-foot stature would allow. Rounding the corner, she looked up at the ten-story brick monstrosity. Her stomach lurched as she stared at the apartment building turned prison.

Robyn's tongue stuck to the roof of her dry mouth as she tried to wet it. Sniffing hard, she squared her shoulders and strode toward the front door.

As expected, an armed guard halted her entrance. "What business do you have here, Miss?" he demanded.

"Don't pretend you don't know me after all this time, Charles. Today's the day. I've gone through the proper channels. I have an appointment with the warden."

Charles frowned. "The warden isn't here right now," he said.

Robyn blinked at him, and it took her a minute to process. She squinted at the guard. "What do you mean 'he's not here'? We have an appointment. After two months of being jerked around, what's going on here?" she demanded.

Charles didn't even flinch at her impotent anger. "I don't know what to tell you."

As her fury reached the boiling point, a man in a tailored suit exited the door behind Charles. His eyes focused on Robyn, taking in her grimy appearance.

"Are you Robyn Loxley?" he asked her, one eyebrow raised.

“Yes, and I’m supposed to be seeing the warden today.”

“That is not possible, but I do have a message from him for you.” The man handed her an envelope.

She hastily opened it.

Dear Miss Loxley,

I regret to inform you that I am unable to grant your admittance to Midshire War Relocation Center.

Warden James Weldon

“Is this a fucking joke?” Robyn demanded from the man in the suit.

He leveled his gaze at her and narrowed his eyes at her foul language. “I am not privy to the contents of the warden’s correspondence, but I assure you that whatever he has written must be the case.”

The man turned and went back inside, and Robyn glared after him. Pursing her lips, Robyn contemplated making a rush for it, but the long barrel of Charles’s firearm made her reconsider.

“Don’t think this is over,” she warned Charles coolly.

He didn’t respond.

Robyn turned on her heel and stomped through the small courtyard. Just as she was about to round the corner, she wrinkled her nose at Charles, pulled down her scarf, and spat in his direction. It was much too far to hit him, but he got the idea.

Too mad to go home, Robyn wandered around the city. The sun hugged the western horizon. She stomped through the soot-covered streets, her fury mounting with every step.

Two months I’ve played their game, she thought. Two months! I shouldn’t even have tried. I knew they would never let me in to see Will. I knew they would never hear me out. Well, I’m done doing it the right way. I’m not playing bureaucratic games anymore.

Unable to take another step, Robyn looked up and saw she was at the waterfront. She leaned against a wide industrial pipe for a moment, watching as it dumped sludge into the bay. Then, she climbed up the ladder on the side of the pipe and sat on top, her eyes widening as she stared at what lay on the other side.

Beyond a canal, an abandoned neighborhood lay before her. It was rusty and crumbling, and she couldn't see a window left unbroken. Under a narrow, grated bridge, the canal wall bore graffiti of a vivid Lincoln green. It pronounced the Hooverville as "Sherwood."

Of course, like most of the residents of Midshire, Robyn had heard of the shanty town Sherwood, the last of its kind. Most of the other Hoovervilles had been destroyed by the Shanty Eradication Program. She didn't know why they hadn't bothered to take this one down; likely the funds were rerouted to the war effort. Whatever the reason, it was a forgotten part of the city, overlooked and devoid of life.

Robyn scanned the other side of the canal and didn't see anyone or anything moving about, as expected. Determined to take a look, she climbed down a ladder on the other side of the pipe and approached the narrow bridge.

But the moment she stepped onto the bridge, a deep voice demanded, "state your business, stranger."

"My business is my own," Robyn snapped, glad her surprise didn't show in her voice.

A giant man, seven feet in height and nearly twice her breadth, stepped out from behind a crumbling wall. "Not just anyone is allowed in Sherwood. State your business or turn back," the man said, hopping onto the other side of the bridge, a long staff in his hand.

Robyn glared at him. "Step aside, or I'll knock you into the canal," she threatened.

The large man raised his eyebrows and grinned. "Are you angling for a fight?"

"Only if you won't move out of my way."

He nodded good-humoredly. "All right then. Much!" he called over his shoulder.

A young boy of eight or nine appeared from behind the wall carrying a staff nearly twice his height. Much handed the staff to the man, who stepped forward and offered it to Robyn.

She took the solid wood in her grip, testing its weight and wishing she and Will had trained more with the staff than the bow.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" the man asked.

"Giving me a weapon was your biggest mistake," Robyn spat.

He grinned again. "I won't go easy on you."

"Neither will I," she growled, lunging forward and aiming a blow at his head.

He parried it to the right and struck out at her stomach. Jumping back, she narrowly avoided the hit. His grin infuriated her, and she ground her teeth. Aiming this time for his feet, again her staff was brushed aside.

She wasn't fast enough to avoid his next attack. His staff cracked her right on top of the head. Dazed, Robyn lost balance and toppled into the canal.

The cold water jolted her back to her senses. When her head broke the surface, she saw her opponent had lowered a rope down to her and was looking ready to dive in after her. She grabbed the rope, and he hauled her up.

Sitting Robyn on the bridge, the man smiled at her, satisfaction sparkling in his eyes. "You're a feisty one," he complimented.

She couldn't hold in her laugh. "Thanks for not going easy on me."

He patted her on the shoulder and helped her to her feet. "What's your name, stranger?" he asked, good-naturedly.

"Robyn."

Holding out his giant hand, he enveloped hers in a firm shake. "I'm Jon Little."

Robyn raised one eyebrow at him and smirked, finding the name terribly ironic.

"So, what brings you to Sherwood, Robyn?"

"Would you believe I was just taking a walk and was curious?"

Jon quirked his mouth, trying to determine the veracity of her explanation. Then, he shook his head and laughed, a deep, happy chuckle one couldn't help but join.

"You sure are something."

Laughing at herself, she suddenly shivered when a cool wind off the bay raised goosebumps on her wet skin.

Jon's smile faded from his face at her shudder. "Come on, let's get you dried off and warmed up."

Robyn trailed Jon across the bridge and into Sherwood. As they caught up with Much, John ruffled the boy's dark hair.

"Robyn, meet Much Molinero."

She smiled at the child. "It's nice to meet you, Much. I'm Robyn."

The boy looked up at her, his slight frown quite serious. "You shouldn't be here," he said.

"Why you...don't pay him any mind, Robyn. He's a little scamp."

"You don't want me here, Much?" she asked the boy.

"Oh, it's not that, señorita. It's just that you're too bonita for a place like Sherwood."

"Oho, you little sweet talker!" Jon chuckled.

"In that case, I should probably find myself a strong,

handsome escort while I'm here. What do you say, Señor Molinero? Will you be my proud protector?"

Much stood up straight, bright eyes shining through the bangs of his dark hair. "Don't worry, señorita. I'll make sure you get home safe."

"Gracias, Much. I'm certain I won't have any trouble with you by my side."

As the boy vigilantly scanned their path for any danger, Robyn looked over at Jon.

He smiled down at her, light shining in his eyes. "This way," he said with a gesture.

She followed Jon through the seemingly abandoned streets of Sherwood. Stepping over debris in the dim light of dusk, the soot and dust from the path clung to Robyn's wet boots.

Above them, a clang sounded. Robyn looked up at the scaffolding of a building never completed. Roughly constructed skywalks crisscrossed overhead. No one was there.

They passed deserted lean-tos made of whatever wood or metal scraps the occupants could find.

Jon Little, or Little Jon as Robyn thought of him, walked boldly on, paying no mind to the occasional skittering sounds of those just out of sight.

He stopped outside a crumbling corner store. The front window had been boarded up to keep the weather out, but the crooked, faded sign above the door still declared the place "Barnaby's Books and Stationery."

He opened the chipped blue door with a loud creak. Much skittered in ahead of them, and Little Jon nodded at Robyn to go next.

The faded wooden floorboards groaned under their steps as they entered the dark bookstore. Robyn could hear Much

shuffling around farther in, past the many wooden shelves stuffed with books.

Robyn ran her fingertips along the tattered spines; these were not the new books one would usually find in a bookstore. They were old and worn. Still, they were well dusted, and she could tell someone cared for them.

She looked back at Little Jon as he shuffled behind her in the dark. The glow of firelight flickered off the walls and ceiling ahead. As Robyn moved toward it, it became clear to her that this was a small living space. Much knelt before the fire he'd just lit in a heavy, stone fireplace.

The flames illuminated a small table and two chairs to one side and a cot next to a nest of blankets on the other.

"Welcome to our home," Little Jon said humbly. "It's not much, I'll grant you. But it keeps the chill out, and we're never short of entertainment," he added, nodding to the shelves.

"It's very cozy," Robyn told him.

He smiled softly. "In any case," he started, crossing to the nest of blankets on the floor, "you can use this to warm up while I go fetch some clothes that will fit you." He handed her the blanket. "Sit by the fire. I won't be long." He took one of the chairs from the table and set it close to the fire then left the way they'd come.

As soon as she'd wrapped the blanket around herself and settled by the hearth, Much sat cross-legged at her feet.

They stared into the fire as it popped and cracked.

"How long have you lived here, Much?" Robyn asked him.

"I don't know," he admitted. "But I know I haven't always lived here. I used to live with my parents. I remember their bakery. But when they died, Jon found me and brought me here." His voice shook a little.

"I also lost my parents at a young age. I was only four years old when they died," Robyn told him.

“Did you have someone like Jon to help?”

She nodded. “Yes, my father’s friend took my sister and me in.”

“That’s good.”

“Are you and Jon the only two who live in Sherwood?”

He frowned. “No, there are others.”

“How many?”

“We’re not supposed to talk about it with people who don’t live here,” he murmured.

“That’s all right. You don’t have to tell me. I was just curious.”

“Where did you learn to fight, Señorita Robyn? Most people who Jon challenges just leave.” His eyes sparkled with curiosity in the firelight.

“I learned from my best friend and his family while we were in school. I’m not very good at hand-to-hand, though I did practice quite a bit. I’m much better with a bow and arrow.” Robyn chuckled.

“A bow and arrow? Would you show me?”

Before Robyn could answer, the door creaked, and Little Jon appeared with an armful of clothes. Robyn stood to meet him.

“I didn’t know what you’d like. But they should fit, and they’re dry.”

“Thank you.” She smiled up at him as he handed her the clothing.

“We’ll be just outside. *Vámonos, Much.*” Little Jon ushered the boy out so Robyn could change.

He’d found her a pair of men’s trousers, which fit her around the waist but were loose in the legs. They were charcoal and had buttoned pouch pockets on the sides. The women’s three-quarter sleeve shirt was snug in the chest and a little too short, with her abdomen just below her belly button exposed. He’d also given her a patchwork poncho of

earthy colors: dark green, brown, grey, and black. It was warm and covered her exposed midriff.

After changing, Robyn folded her wet work clothes and went to meet Little Jon and Much, who leaned against the eroded bricks outside their bookstore home.

“Thank you again for these,” she said.

“Ah well, it was my fault you fell into the canal after all.”

Robyn laughed. “Well, I should have heeded your warning. I don’t think I need to tell you I get a little blinded by my anger sometimes. I don’t always make the best decisions.”

He grinned. “What got you so riled, if I might ask?”

She frowned, not sure she was ready to open up that much yet. She looked up at the darkened sky, knowing she’d never be able to see the moon or stars through the smoke of the city. “Perhaps next time I’ll tell you all about it. As for right now, I need to be getting home.”

“Of course, I’m sure whoever’s waiting for you is probably worried. A husband, a child...?”

Robyn snorted. “Nah, none of that for me. I doubt they even notice I’m gone. But even so, my sister will be worried if she goes looking for me.”

Little Jon nodded. “You best get going then. But if ever you want to blow off some steam, you know where to find me. And if someone else is guarding the bridge, you just tell them you’ve come to see Jon Little.”

“I’ll do that,” she told him.

Then, Jon and Much led her through the dark borough that was Sherwood. When she’d crossed the bridge over the canal, she looked back at them and waved, promising herself she would visit them again soon.