



*A novel of metaphysical suspense and forbidden romance.*

## **Clifford & Veronica**

By Jerry W. Lennon & Mary Ann Tobar

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Tetsuya Hirose

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## PROLOGUE

### IRON AGE

As the hooded figures walked out of the dense undergrowth of the towering forest, they fanned out to form a semi-circle in front of a thatched hut. The group approached cautiously and respectfully. They heard a baby cry out its first breath, then the infant's cry turned to a sigh of contentment as it suckled at its mother's breast. Standing just outside the door, an elderly man with a white beard reaching down to his waist asked timidly, "Is it the Caretaker?"

A voice from within the dark interior answered, "Yes, Lord Druid! Yes, it is a girl."

The Elder Druid nodded, his face hinting at a smile, as he tried to catch a glimpse of the newborn child. Turning to the hooded group that had been gathering, he announced, "It is she, and she will be named, as always, Veronica. Locme, my son, stay and give her guidance in her Wisdom."

The young Druid standing at the edge of the crowd stepped forward and interrupted, "But Father, I am not worthy of the task."

"Locme, you are now the Talisman from this day forward." Seeing the puzzlement on his son's face, he added,

"You know this day was to come. My life on this earth is complete."

The young druid answered in a trembling voice, trying to find strength, "I will do my best, Father."

"That is all that is needed." He patted the young druid's shoulder as if saying farewell.

The bearded older man scanned the hooded crowd, milling around but standing respectfully. Smiling and speaking loudly, "It is good you are all here."

The group watched the older man walking toward the grassy rise near the hut. The closer he got to the base of the slope, his steps seemed to quicken as he climbed the short hill as a younger man would. Then turning around, he looked down at the upturned faces and said in a strong, mellow voice, "Let us welcome the light of the sun one more time together." He raised his arms over his head, and the first rays of the rising sun reflected off the bands of silver and gold he wore on his arms. The glare was so brilliant that the figure seemed to disappear. The hooded assembly shielded their eyes with their hands from the sudden blinding light. When they opened their eyes, there was just the gold and silver sickle lying on the ground that the High Druid wore in his belt as a symbol of his authority.

One of the cloaked figures nearest the hill scampered to where the Elder had been just moments ago. He picked up the sickle, and on bended knee with his eyes cast down, he raised it in the air as if hoping it would summon back their leader.

Locme started toward the hut to see his new charge, the Caretaker, but looked back just as the rays of the morning sun hit the metal bands his father wore. Locme changed his direction and walked up the hill steadily and, without hesitation, took the extended tool from the outstretched hand of the cloaked priest. As the young High Druid held it up over his head, the people assembled pushed back their hoods to reveal men and women who raised their arms in front with palms out in unison, acknowledging the new Druid Talisman.

## CUMBRIA

"This herb is a rare find, Veronica," Locme said with authority as the young girl bent down to pick up the tender bud beginning to flower.

She answered, "Yes, it is for this time of the season."

"But look, see the needle mushrooms?" Locme pointed out. "They have nourished the plant to yield. Now is the time to blend it -- at its peak strength. Learn this. Always use the needles to coax the Finecomb to reach its full potential. The younger the plant, the longer the solution will last—the rest of the ingredients you can store as you wish. Never utter the name of Finecomb to anybody! Protect the Enabler power's knowledge. It is your duty. Is that understood, Veronica?" Before she could answer, he said, "Now go practice your skills. Smithy tells me that you're a bit heavy on your feet," he ordered.

"Oh, am I? Who said that? The Bladesmith? The fat maker of dull steel that couldn't cut hot butter?" Scowled the young girl, who looked more like a spoiled preteen than a skilled swordsman. She drew her sword, smiling at her teacher and looking directly into his eyes, and said, "Master Druid, sir, test me!" As she danced around her teacher, smiling and giving him a challenging look. "Master Druid, test me!"

"You are a sassy and cheeky lass. If he heard you, he would take you to task. You would be cleaning up the horse stable for months." Stepping back, he drew his sword and

stepped into the ready position, "The first one who draws...." No sooner had he got into the ready position, Veronica sidestepped and leaped towards him, nicking his wrist with a flick of her blade just as he said "blood ...".

"...wins." As she stepped back, they both looked at his wrist as it started to bleed. He looked at her, and they both laughed. "It seems the student has taught the teacher not to listen to those who wish to cause mischief," laughed Locme. "Now, what to do to stop the bleeding?" "How about this?" Veronica reached into the deerskin bag tied at her waist.

## THE FRANKS

She could not remember how she got captured. That part of her mind was closed off. As she looked down at the bindings on her wrists, she knew what she must do. The chains were of coarse steel and made for a man's large hands. Her feet were left unfettered, and she was naked. She heard groans and sobbing all around her. At the far end of the tent, she could barely make out two men assaulting a woman. She looked down at her legs. No. She had not been violated, but sensed it would not be long before these two men turned their attention toward her.

She effortlessly squeezed her hands out of the manacles made for larger hands while looking for a weapon. She was in luck. Her captor's chains were tied to a stake with a rope. She quickly untied the knot, promptly scooped up the steel chain, and ran toward the two men at the other end of the tent. They died, never knowing what hit them. Veronica looked back to see if there was any further threat. She then gently turned the head of the woman she had saved from being assaulted. Veronica smiled, patting the woman's head, assuring her she was safe. Veronica pulled the tunic off the Saxon she had just killed and told the woman to put it on, but the woman just stared at the two dead men in stunned silence. Veronica grabbed the other tunic and put it on, smiling and nodding yes. The woman finally

responded with a curt shake of her head and quickly put on the filthy tunic.

Veronica gestured for her to follow her as she picked up the Saxon's short sword and tested it for its heft. New energy flowed through her. She glanced around the tent and walked its length, freeing all the women with well-aimed swipes at the ropes that made them prisoners. Veronica asked one of the women who looked more alert, "Why are you here?" Veronica found herself speaking Latin.

The woman replied, "We are enslaved people to be sold. Most of us are Franks fleeing from the Swabia."

Veronica cut her off, "What year is it?"

The woman was taken aback by her question. She thought everyone should know, "Why, it's been a year since the crowning of Charlemagne as Emperor!"

Veronica snapped her head back as if being stuck, "Has Charlemagne married Fastrada?"

The woman stammered, "I, I am Fastrada!"

Veronica smiled, knowing now what she must do, "Come, we must hurry before they discover we are free." Slightly raising her voice, addressing the other prisoners in the tent, she continued, "If you want to live, follow me. Be quick and quiet. This way."

Veronica ran to one side of the tent and cut a slit down one wall, letting the light spill inside. She cautiously looked out before stepping through the slit. As she widened the opening, she beckoned to those inside to follow her. It was early dusk,

and the light was fading. The smells and sounds were very familiar to her, and she knew a great battle had just been fought. Veronica shook off the feeling and thought about the task at hand. No one was on watch. The soldiers were busy licking their wounds and trying to calm the screaming wounded, thrashing in pain on the ground, to notice the women in the growing shadows breaking for the forest and freedom.

Some women looked back and stopped as they saw the woman who had saved them was not following. Veronica urged them on, pulling Fastrada aside, saying, "You must lead them to Worms." The young woman looked puzzled, but before she could say anything, Veronica continued, "You will meet your destiny. Now go," as Veronica waved her on.

She turned to finish dressing like a Saxon soldier, adjusting a discarded breastplate and shouldering a spear. She next looked for a horse to ride. Saying to herself, *I must find Charlemagne, or all will be lost.*



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