

Chapter One

England, Spring 1268

Lord Nicholas de Bremont fought against the unwelcome vision forming in his mind. He concentrated on the rough grain of the fence before him, the gray of the weathered post, even the stench of the animal pen in which he stood.

Anything to stop the vision.

He fell to his knees, unmindful of the muck. Piercing pain shot through his skull. A wave of nausea rolled through him, and he swallowed hard to keep the contents of his stomach in place.

“My lord? What is it?” Walter bent over to peer at Nicholas.

“Tis nothing.”

“Beg your pardon, but *nothin’* don’t drop a man to his knees.”

Nicholas closed his eyes, willing the pounding in his head to cease. Cold mud seeped through his chausses. *Christ, he really had fallen.* The sudden recurrence of his second sight hadn’t been part of his plan for the fine spring afternoon and proved he’d failed once again to stifle his cursed ‘gift’. “I’ll be fine in a moment.”

He gritted his teeth and grabbed the post to pull himself up. A deep, slow breath eased both the sharp pain in his temple and his upset stomach.

Success. The scene developing in his mind faded. He'd caught only a glimpse of a strange keep, then a narrow stone room with a pallet on a dirt floor. Neither meant anything to him, but that came as no surprise.

Rarely were his visions clear or trustworthy.

"The smell of those pigs must be botherin' ya." His servant sounded hopeful that the offensive odor was the cause.

"Nay. 'Tis not that."

"Humph." Walter shook his head. "We'd best stop our work."

Nicholas met his gaze. "Truly, I am well."

"What did ya *see*, then?" The grizzled old man, who'd been with Nicholas since boyhood, eyed him with an uneasy expression.

Nicholas knew he couldn't fool Walter. He'd witnessed Nicholas suffer through too many visions. "Never mind. Let us finish this fence and be done with our day." He lifted the heavy mallet.

"I was fixin' it just fine afore you came along," Walter grumbled.

Nicholas had been riding past when he'd seen the elderly, stooped man struggling to nail a board into place. Though he knew it would sting Walter's pride, he'd stopped to help. "Indeed you were. Next time, have young Thomas aid you." Nicholas nailed another plank onto the post. "'Tis kind of you to help since Mistress Mildred has no husband to fix it. You seem rather fond of her."

The servant gaped at Nicholas as though he'd lost his mind. "Where would ya get such a notion?"

Nicholas shrugged. He'd raised the subject only to

distract Walter from the return of his visions.

Why had the vision come?

What could it mean?

Months had passed since one so strong had threatened him. As he half listened to Walter deny affection for Mildred, he tried to focus on the simple task of hammering a nail into the board to keep any further visions at bay.

He worked quickly, well aware Mistress Mildred watched from her cottage. The last thing he needed was for the villagers to discuss how strangely the new lord of Staverton acted. He'd been granted this crumbling holding in Somerset by his liege lord and intended to make it a success. Gaining the trust and loyalty of the people here would be much easier if he could keep his second sight hidden.

Soon thereafter, he and Walter left a grateful Mildred with her geese and pigs and made their way toward the keep.

"There be more than that fence in need of mendin'," Walter commented as they crossed the bailey.

"Aye, but there's little money left in the coffers." The thatched roofs of cottages, the door of the smithy, even the walls of the keep – all needed repairs. While grateful for his boon, the responsibility for the land and the people here weighed heavily on him. Hard work and wealth would be needed to restore the holding to its previous glory, but at the moment, hard work was all he could provide.

"A bride with a healthy dowry would solve many problems, my lord," Walter suggested. "Time for an heir."

"Nay," Nicholas denied vehemently. "Not for one such as me."

Walter stopped to look up at him, his brow creased. "Yer not the monster ya fear yerself to be."

Nicholas shook his head, unwilling to discuss the matter. His life had not been an easy one. People feared what they didn't understand, and thus far, no one other than his family understood him. He'd been taunted, shunned, and deemed evil since he was a boy. His reputation as 'crazed' had followed him all the way to the lists of Normandy. He'd learned not to trust anyone. Even the thought of the lonely years that stretched before him did not change his mind.

Upon returning to the keep, Nicholas ate yet another tasteless meal, wishing his mother would pay a visit and improve the fare with her herbs. Soon after, he retired for the night. The visions, even a mere hint of one, always left him exhausted.

He looked around his spacious but stark chamber as he undressed, feeling unsettled. Loneliness was a familiar companion, yet Walter's words stirred a longing he'd buried deep. Memories of his parents' love for one another made him wish that one day, he might have a family of his own, but that could never be.

As he lay down on the large tester bed, he couldn't shake his restlessness. When would this room, this keep, this holding, feel like home? Something was missing, but in the month he'd been here, he hadn't determined how to fill the emptiness.

Perhaps after he'd had a chance to see to more repairs, he'd ask his mother and father, or even William to visit. *Sir* William, he corrected himself and smiled at the idea of the little brother who'd followed him everywhere now a knight. No one could make him laugh like William. His brother's faith in him had seen him through many dark times.

He crossed his arms behind his head, sleep evading him. Heavy red curtains draped the bed, and the firelight sent shadows dancing along the walls. If

someone would've told him two months past that he'd set aside his sword to sleep in a soft bed in his own holding with fences to repair, an entire village depending on him, and elderly servants to placate, he would've laughed.

Life could change in the space of a heartbeat. He'd best remember that.



Blue light flashed.

Sharp pain pierced Nicholas's head.

Images rushed through his mind before he could stop them.

An unfamiliar keep bathed in sunlight.

A small chamber. Stone walls. Dirt floor.

William on a narrow pallet. Restless, his face pale and thin. His shoulder bound with a blood-soaked cloth.

Dear God!

Light burst again.

William in a rough wooden cart. Too still. Outside. In the predawn light. Before a familiar portcullis.

Staverton's front gate!

Nicholas bolted upright. His heart raced, and he fought to catch his breath. The images from the vision burned in his mind. Did William lay injured at the entrance?

Even worse, dead?

His legs hardly held him as he staggered to the door, grabbing clothing as he went. He flew down the stairs, filled with dread at what might await him.



"My lady, is this close enough?"

Lady Elizabeth Crefton eyed the massive shadow towering above them, barely discernible in the darkness as Staverton's gate. "Nay. We must get nearer."

Robert, her loyal steward, heaved a sigh, his breath forming a puff of white in the crisp pre-dawn air. Reluctance in every step, he tugged the horse and cart along the narrow road.

Elizabeth pulled up the hood of her cloak, protection from the cold but more to hide her identity. Her heart pounded so hard she feared the noise would awaken the unconscious man she and Robert accompanied.

“Lady Elizabeth, are you certain...I mean, mayhap we should turn back.” Robert slowed his steps to match hers and peered at the wooden cart with trepidation.

“We need to get Sir William to his brother. Father will return home on the morrow, and the knight must be gone. ’Tis the only way to save them both.” Elizabeth hoped her whispered voice held more confidence than her heart. Did she do the right thing?

“But your father, my lady...I fear he won’t understand why the dungeon now stands empty.”

“I’ll remind him that he agreed to set William free. He’ll remember.” She closed her eyes and prayed it would be true for he hadn’t remembered much of late.

“The knight’s fever seems worse.”

The full moon shed enough light to reveal the tall man tucked in the cart with blankets and furs padding his simple conveyance. Elizabeth stopped to lean over the side and place her hand on his forehead. Robert was right. Fever had set in five days past and showed no sign of lessening. “I’ve done what I can for him, but ’tis not enough.”

“What if he’s not found?”

“We’re not leaving until someone finds him.” She looked up at the closed portcullis, worry heavy in her heart. When she’d planned this, it had seemed so simple. Leave William at the gate so he could recover

in the familiar comfort of his brother's home, hopefully with a talented healer to aid him, something she couldn't provide.

Reality painted a much different picture. How were they to unhook the cart, take the horse, and hide without raising any alarm? And if they managed all that, how could they get the guards' attention so William was discovered but not them? Even more worrisome was her fear that this journey had pushed William to death's door.

What had she done?

All this because the death of her brother had sent her already unstable father over the brink of sanity. He'd captured the knight he believed guilty of her brother's murder. After listening to Sir William's denial and obvious confusion over the event, a seed of doubt had been planted in Elizabeth. It had grown to the point where she'd spent days trying to convince her father of the knight's innocence. She was certain someone else had murdered her brother, leaving William to take the blame.

If she was right, and Sir William was discovered at their keep...even worse, if he died there, her father would lose his title and holding, perhaps his life. She could not, once again, fail to protect those she loved.

Elizabeth knew little about this man or his family, but she was certain they'd insist on answers. She couldn't blame them. Nor could she blame her father for what grief had led him to do.

Gregory's death had left a gaping hole in his heart, as well as hers. Despite their age difference and his prolonged absences during his training as a squire and then a knight, she and Gregory had been close. The realization that he'd never again come to visit with his quick wit and booming laugh squeezed her heart. She missed him dearly.

The only option before her was to try to right the wrongs and hope her efforts protected everyone. Resolved, she knew she had to follow through with her plan. She couldn't haul the poor, injured knight back home again, not after she'd made it this far. And she refused to allow this man to die while in her care.

"Let us see how much closer we can get to the gate," she whispered. The horizon already held a hint of rose. She scanned the top of the wall, wondering if even now an unseen sentry watched them.

Robert's worried gaze followed hers up to the twin towers. "God be with us." He led the horse forward again.

Her clever steward had wrapped the horse's hooves so they made little sound on the cobblestones that paved the road before the gate. The noise of the cart wheels was dampened by their slow pace.

"This is as near as we dare get. Let's turn the cart sideways so it doesn't roll away." Elizabeth hunted along the edge of the road for some large rocks to prop under the wheels. She wedged them in place while Robert unhooked the horse.

"Sir William?" she whispered as she touched his hand. The knight didn't respond. "I am so sorry. I pray you understand and will someday forgive us."

"My lady, *now*," Robert urged as he glanced uneasily between the supine knight and the gate.

"Aye." She looked back at William one last time. *Please, God, don't let him die.* She squeezed his hand then turned to lead the way back home.

"Hold! Who goes there?"

Elizabeth's breath caught in her throat. With a quick gesture to Robert, she melted into the shadows of the curtain wall. Robert followed with the horse. The ground was steep. She hurried along, but didn't dare run for fear of losing her footing in the dark. She

veered toward the woods, hoping to reach the safety of the trees before further alarm was raised.

She could hear Robert's harsh breathing directly behind her. The horse snorted; the sound echoed in the quiet of the early morning. After reaching the cover of the woods, she looked back to make certain William had been discovered.

Elizabeth had tried to explain the importance of secrecy to the knight during one of his more coherent moments. He'd seemed to understand her request. Perhaps she'd asked too much of him, or he'd merely agreed to placate her. Whatever the reason, she could only pray he'd honor her wish.

Or that he remembered it.

He or his family could demand retribution for his capture but not if they failed to discover who'd held him. That was a risk she had to take.

Torchlight appeared at the top of the wall followed by a quick shout as the portcullis rumbled open. The commotion surely meant someone had seen William.

As she watched, the silhouette of a man appeared. He stood motionless beside the cart. Could that be William's brother? She'd thought about leaving a letter, but what could she possibly say? *I fear your brother is dying so I've abandoned him at your gate?*

Nay. No explanation would suffice for her or her father's behavior. Only God could forgive them, and that seemed doubtful. What she'd done this night was reprehensible, but had it been enough to save both her father and William?

"Come, my lady," Robert urged her. "Let us go."

She turned away to begin the long journey home. With Robert following, she picked her way through the dark woods, worry heavy in her heart.



Nicholas stared in disbelief at the man revealed by

the flickering torches and early morning light. Shock held him rooted to the spot as he tried to grasp that this was indeed his brother's body. "Who left him here? Did you see anything?"

"We thought we saw movement from up on the wall," a guard answered, "but we found only the cart."

"Do you know him, my lord?" asked another.

"He's my brother." He reached out a tentative hand and touched William's cheek. Nicholas's breath expelled at the heat of his skin.

"Is he alive?" a man-at-arms asked.

"Aye. For now." Nicholas hesitated, torn between searching for whoever had left William and seeing to his welfare. The latter won. "Take four men with you and search the woods nearby. Alert the others if you find anything. Anything at all."

Nicholas turned and looked for a familiar face in the group of men surrounding him. So many were still strangers. His gaze caught on Walter. "Doesn't Mistress Mildred know something of healing?"

"Aye, my lord." Walter grabbed the arm of a young man standing nearby. "Thomas, fetch Mildred. Be quick!"

The squire sent a questioning glance to Nicholas, then bobbed his head and ran down the path toward her cottage.

"Get him inside," Nicholas ordered. Dread filled him. Along with guilt. Immense guilt.

If only he'd let the vision come, perhaps he could've prevented this. Yet he knew from past experience it often did no good. Sometimes the things he saw never happened at all. Other times, any action he took only made matters worse. The damned second sight served no purpose.

What had happened to William? How had he gone from the hale and hearty brother Nicholas had left on

the lists in Normandy not two months past to this pale, wasted figure tucked in the cart?

"I'm sorry we didn't see anything, my lord," the guard said, shifting his feet. "It's been some time since we've had trouble."

"You had no reason to expect problems." *But I did*, he added to himself.

Within moments, several men managed to pull the cart into the bailey. Nicholas eased his arm under William's shoulders, taking extra care with his right one, which he thought from his vision was injured. He directed two men to lift his legs. With great care, they moved him into the keep and up the stairs to a chamber and laid him on the large bed.

Walter lit several candles to add to the weak light of dawn coming in through the narrow windows and sent everyone else out of the room.

William stirred, his eyes fluttered open, and he looked around the chamber with an unfocused gaze.

Nicholas leaned forward, his heart in his throat, thrilled to see him awake. "William?"

That unfocused, brown-eyed gaze settled on Nicholas. "Where?" His brow wrinkled in confusion.

"At Staverton. We found you in a cart at the front gate. Who did this?"

"Glad I'm...here. Crazy bastard took me." His eyes closed.

"Will? William!"

William's breathing deepened, and his expression relaxed into sleep once again.

Frustrated, Nicholas touched his cheek, hoping to revive him so he could get some answers. "William."

Nothing.

"God's teeth, he looks near to death," Walter said. "Can you *see*? Do you know more?"

Nicholas shook his head. "The vision showed him in

a dungeon with an injury to his shoulder.” He unlaced William’s loose fitting tunic to reveal a neatly wrapped, blood-soaked cloth underneath.

A maid arrived, carrying a pitcher of steaming water and some cloths. “I thought you might need these, my lord,” she said as she set down the supplies on a table near the bed.

“My thanks. Watch for Mistress Mildred and send her up as soon as she arrives.”

“Aye, my lord.” She curtsied and, with one last glance at his brother, hurried from the chamber.

“Walter, help me remove his tunic,” Nicholas said. He eased William’s arm out of the garment while the old servant did the same on the other side. A flowery fragrance released into the air as they pulled it off. Nicholas frowned at the unfamiliar scent.

With William still unconscious, he removed the bandage to find a long, deep gash oozing pus and blood.

“Oh, damn me,” Walter whispered.

“This must be at least a week old, perhaps more.”

“Smells nearly rotten.” Walter wrinkled his nose.

Nicholas touched the angry red flesh surrounding the wound. “Tis so hot.”

Mistress Mildred bustled in, much to Nicholas’s relief. With a quick nod to both men, she moved to William to examine the deep cut with capable hands. “That’s a bad one, for certain. Whoever caused this injury had deadly intent,” she mumbled.

Nicholas’s stomach clenched. Who would want to kill William? And why? “Walter, let’s try to cool him. He’s burning up.”

“Aye, my lord.” The old man dipped a rag in the water then wrung it out and placed it on William’s forehead, staying out of Mildred’s way.

“His fever is high,” she agreed as she pulled back

William's eyelid and looked closely at his eye, then prodded open his mouth and examined his tongue.

"What is it you look for?" Nicholas asked.

"Life, my lord," she answered. "Signs of life."

Panicked, Nicholas moved closer. "He woke for a few moments when we laid him down. He even spoke."

"Humph." Her attention returned to William's shoulder.

A heavy weight crushed Nicholas's chest as she shook her head, muttering to herself.

She ran her hands over his body, pausing on the side of his head. "There's a bad bump here." At last she turned to Nicholas. "My lord, I understand this man is your brother, but I won't lie." She hesitated and glanced again at William.

"What is it?" Nicholas prodded her.

"You'd best send for the priest."

His heart plummeted.

Nay. This could not be.

He stared at his brother, and it took all his will to resist shaking him to try to rouse him again. "Surely there's something that can be done. Some remedy you can mix to aid him."

"Have no doubt I'll do all I can. I'm just not certain it will be enough."

Nicholas wiped his face with his hands, rubbing his temples at the headache that brewed there. He tried to clear his mind and focus his thoughts. For one of the few times in his life, he hoped for a vision that might tell him what to do or at least give him a hint of what was to come.

But he saw nothing.

Only an empty well of grief and the painful pressure in his chest that echoed the pounding in his head.

Once again, he'd failed to make sense of a vision.

This time, the price might be his brother's life. "Mildred, do all you can. I refuse to send for the priest. Not yet."

"As you wish, my lord. I need to fetch some things," the widow said, then left the chamber.

"I'll see if I can help her, my lord," Walter murmured and departed as well.

Nicholas looked at the shadow of the brother he knew and loved. "William? If you can hear me, know this. I will find who did this to you. And I will make him pay threefold. I swear it."