

CHAPTER ONE

The month of December

Year of our Lord 1231

Skirmish of Bog Wood near Blackadder Water, the England/Scotland border

“By everything that is holy, I do hate a battle.”

A soft female sigh filled the damp and cool air. The reply was harsh.

“So help me, Caladora, if ye faint again I shall take a stick to ye.”

Five women stood high atop a hill, looking down upon a grisly scene far below in what was once a peaceful and serene valley. Where lavender heather used to wash amidst the lush green there were now broken, bloody corpses, the result of a fight that had lasted for a day and a night. Now, everything was eerily still with only the occasional cries of the dying. No more sounds of swords; only the sounds of death.

The sun was beginning to set over the distant hills, casting the valley in a shadowed light. To the women waiting on the high hill, it looked as if Hell itself was setting in to begin claiming its souls. It was ended, this battle; one battle in a mightier war that had been going on for as long as anyone could remember. The war for the Scots border.

The Lady Jordan Scott waited with her aunts and cousins, waiting for the signal from her father that would send them down into the valley to begin assessing their own wounded and making sure any enemy wounded were sent into the netherworld. She hated it; all of it. She hated seeing good men die, watching their life blood drain away and listening to their pleas for help. She hated the bloody English for causing all of this blessed pain and suffering because they believed themselves the superior race. All Scots were wild men in their eyes, unthinking and unfeeling, and somehow the English felt compelled to act as their cage-keeper.

But Jordan was anything but wild and unthinking. She had a heart and a mind and soul, sometimes softer than her clansmen would have liked. As the sun continued to set she pulled the hood of her woolen cloak closer, staving off the chill and the gloom. Just when the wait seemed excessive, a shout from one of her father’s men released the dam of women who now poured down into the valley. . As the dusk deepened, the hunt began.

Jordan was one of the last one into the valley, dragging her feet even when her aunts casted her threatening glares. She ignored them. In fact, she moved away from them so they would not watch every move she made, removing her hood and picking her targets among the dead.

Her long, honey-colored hair hung loose about her as she bent over a young man and began to tug on a gold signet ring. It seemed to be securely stuck to his finger and she swallowed hard; her father would expect her to take out her dirk and cut off the finger, throwing the whole thing into her basket.

She wrinkled her nose at that prospect and let the dead hand fall back to the ground. She was not going to cut off the finger, no matter what her father said. She didn’t have the stomach for it. But the man at her feet suddenly groaned, and Jordan, startled with fear and without hesitation, yanked her dirk from its sheath at her forearm and plunged the blade deep into his soft neck. The man stilled, silenced forever by the cold steel of her knife.

Gasping with shock, Jordan stared down at the man and could scarcely believe what she had done. She didn't know why she had done it, only that she had been terrified and afraid if she didn't kill the man that he would rise up and kill her. Her breath came in short, horrified pants as she stared down at her kill. *Sweet Jesu,* had she deteriorated to such a scared rabbit that she would kill before thinking?

In disgust she threw down her dirk and stumbled away from the dead man, wondering if indeed her father's warring ways were claiming her. Already, she had to get away from the destruction and

clear her thoughts. She didn't care if her family thought she was weak. They had tried to toughen her up, to make her strong and fearless, but she didn't have it in her. She was sweet and nurturing, kind and gentle. There were those better suited to tend those on the battlefield and cut fingers off for the gold they wore; she was going to find a place to hide and wait until the hunting and killing was over.

Glancing over her shoulder to see if she were being watched, Jordan wandered away from the field of destruction and into a small valley. Nestled at the bottom among a few scrawny trees was a small stream, with water glistening silver in the moonlight.

It was peaceful and calm, and she could feel her composure returning. She knelt by the stream and washed her hands as if cleansing away the confusion and revulsion she felt. She knew she was a disappointment to her father on two accounts: not being born male, and not being able to sufficiently deal with the normal aspects of being a daughter of one of the fiercest warlords on the Scottish border. Although her father loved her dearly and never made her feel anything less, she knew deep down he wished she were stronger. Sometimes she wished it, too.

Her father did not pretend that he always understood his only child, especially where her loves for music and animals were concerned. Jordan could sing like an angel and could dance a Scottish jig like the devil himself, accomplishments for which he was enormously proud, but sometimes he just could not comprehend the female mind. He was a warrior, a baron by title, and his world was one of death and fighting, not the gentle world where his daughter dwelled.

Still, he would not be pleased if he found out she had run off like a scared goat and sought refuge this night. Jordan found a large boulder by the creek and sat on its icy surface, watching the water bubble in the moonlight. She wondered why she wasn't like the rest of her female kin; bold and fearless. Above her, a nighthawk rode the drafts, crying out to its mate and she watched it for a moment before returning moodily to the stream.

"If you are thinking of drowning yourself, 'tis a bit shallow."

The voice came from the darkness behind her. Jordan leapt off the rock, terrified as she whirled to face her accoster. She could make out a form of a man lying at the base of one of the bushy trees but could not make out much more in the darkness.

Panic rose in her throat and she realized with deep regret that she had left her dirk back on the battlefield. She could scream, but he appeared to be large and would most likely pounce and slit her throat before she could utter a sound. She froze, unsure of what to do next. She certainly did not want to provoke the man with the decidedly English accent.

"What...what do ye want?" she demanded shakily.

The moon emerged from behind the clouds, revealing the landscape in bright silver light. Jordan could see right away the man was gravely injured, as there was a great deal of dark blood covering his legs and the ground beneath him. It didn't take her long to figure out that he was unable to rise much less attack her. Her courage surged and she was sure she could run back and retrieve her dirk before he could move upon her, the damnable English devil. She would do to him exactly what he would do to her given half a chance.

But on the heels of that thought came another. Jordan's blood ran cold with abhorrence; she had just killed one man and punished herself endlessly for it. Now she was planning the death of another. More of her father's violent influence was a part of her than she cared to admit. Perhaps this wounded man was innocent of any killing at all, she thought naïvely. Mayhap he was a victim of the situation, forced to fight by the hated English king. Perhaps he didn't want to fight at all and then found himself a casualty.

Jordan forced herself to calm, realizing that the man could not hurt her. She took a step to get a better look at him yet still kept a healthy distance between them.

"Speak up," she told him, feeling braver. "What are ye doing here? What do ye want?"

She heard the man sigh. "What do I want?" he repeated wearily. "I want to return home. But what I want and what will be are two entirely different things all together. What do you intend to do

with me?"

Jordan eyed him beneath the silver moonlight. "I intend to do nothing with ye," she replied softly. "I dunna need to. From the looks of that wound, ye will be dead by morn."

The man laid his head back against the tree in a defeated gesture. "Mayhap," he said, eyeing her in the darkness just as she was eyeing him. "Will you tell me something?"

"What?"

"What is your name?"

She saw no harm in giving her name to a dying man. "Jordan."

His head came up from the trunk. "Jordan? A sound name. Yet it is usually a man's name."

Jordan moved a few steps closer. "My mother, being a pious woman, named me for the River Jordan," she replied. "Jordan Mary Joseph is my full name. Moreover, I was intended to be a male child."

The man's eyes grew intense and Jordan felt a shiver run down her spine. It struck her just how handsome he was, English or no, and her cheeks grew warm.

"You are most definitely not a male child, Jordan Mary Joseph," he said, almost seductively. "How old are you?"

"I have seen twenty years," she replied, flattered and disarmed by his statement.

"Then you are married with children," he stated. "Was your husband on the battlefield?"

"I have no husband," Jordan said flatly. At twenty, she was embarrassed that she had not yet wed; it was a sore subject and one she certainly did not wish to discuss with him.

"No husband?" he repeated, evidently shocked. "Why not?"

She frowned. "Ye ask too many questions, English."

He did not reply. He lay back against the tree again, closing his eyes. His strength was draining and Jordan guessed that his death was swiftly approaching.

As she gazed at him, she began to feel pity for the knight. He was perhaps ten years older than her, and was still a young man. He was very big with enormous hands and big, muscular legs, and his facial features, although surrounded by mail and a helm, were chiseled and handsome. She was coming to feel sorry that his life would soon be over from a wound sustained in a senseless, meaningless skirmish.

A thought occurred to her; she knew that she could make his last hours more comfortable with what she carried in her satchel. The healing items were meant for her own people but she simply could not leave the knight and not help him. It was her soft heart tugging at her, concern for another. She hoped her Scot ancestors moldering in the ground would forgive her treasonous act.

"English," she said softly. "Would ye let me tend yer wound?"

One eye opened in mild surprise. She could see suspicion in the mysterious depths.

"Why?" he whispered. "So you may finish what your clansman started?"

"Nay," she answered, although she didn't blame his distrust. "So that I may make yer last hours a bit more bearable." When he did not reply, she frowned at him. "I promise I wanna intentionally hurt ye. Ye can bleed to death or ye can let me help ye; 'tis all the same to me."

After an eternal pause, he reached up with effort and tore the helmet from his head, revealing dark wet hair plastered to his pasty head. Clumsily, he began to remove his armor.

Jordan closed the distance between them with small, rapid steps and knelt beside him. His hands were heavy and unwieldy and she batted them away, finishing the job of the removal herself. She fumbled a bit with his cuisses, or thigh armor, because the wound was along the edge of the armor where it met his breeches. A vulnerable point, she noticed. She felt a little apprehensive being so close to an English warrior and deliberately avoided his gaze. She could feel his eyes on her, watching every move she made. Her palms began to sweat as she stripped off the remainder of the protective gear.

As Jordan bent over her work, her pink tongue between her teeth in concentration, the knight studied the fine porcelain features and the huge round eyes of the most amazing green color. He

could see it even in the moonlight. Her eyebrows were arched ever so delicately, and her lashes were long and dense. She had stopped biting her tongue long enough for him to see that her lips were soft and sensuous.

Her hair licked at him as she moved and the scent of lavender was unmistakable. Her hair was dark blond, straight and silky. Every time she threw the satiny mass over her shoulder to keep it out of her way, he was greeted by the perfume of the purple buds and found it utterly captivating. Even as he stared at her, he could not believe this woman was a Scot; she embodied everything he had always believed they were not. In fact, it took him a moment to realize that she was physically perfect. If God himself had come to him and asked him to describe his perfect mate, he would have described Jordan feature for feature. It was an odd realization.

Unaware of the knight's thoughts, Jordan glanced up and met his gaze and was faced with the most fascinating shade of hazel she had ever seen. Yet for his size and his strength, and the fact that the man was obviously a seasoned knight, they were the kindest eyes she had ever encountered. Unnerved, she tore her eyes away and continued her good deed with draining concentration. The man intimidated her in too many ways to comprehend.

With the armor off, Jordan could see the wound in his thigh was substantial. He had packed linen rags on it in an attempt to stop the bleeding, but he had quickly become too weak to do much more. It was a deep, long gash that ran nearly the entire length of his long thigh. She tore his breeches away in an attempt to have a clear field to tend the wound, noticing that his legs were as thick as tree trunks.

Jordan picked bits of material and mail from the wound, wiping at the clotted blood and dirt that had invaded the area. The further involved she became, the more she could see that the gash was all the way to the bone.

Jordan retrieved her bag and began to pull out her aids: whisky, silk thread and needle, and strips of boiled linen.

"Here," she said, thrusting the open whisky bottle at him and keeping her eyes on the wound. "Drink this."

He accepted the bottle from her and he took several long swallows. She took it back from him and set it beside her, pausing with a furrowed brow and thinking that even if he survived the wound, he would surely lose the leg. She did not know that he was still watching her face intently, marveling at the incredible beauty of it.

The knight, in fact, did not make it a habit of gawking at women. Outside of an occasional whore, he had never had a remotely serious relationship with a woman, although there had been many a female who had tried to woo him. He had a great deal of respect for the opposite sex, but Northwood Castle was his life and a wife did not fit into his plans.

"Will I live, Lady Jordan?" he asked after a moment. "Or should I prepare my greeting for St. Peter?"

She sighed and picked up the whisky bottle. Reluctantly, she met his eyes for a brief moment to convey a silent apology before dousing the entire length of the wound with the burning alcohol.

The knight's only reaction was to snap his head away from her so that she could not see his face. Not a sound was uttered nor a twitch of the muscle seen. *Remarkable*, she thought. She had never seen anyone take the pain of a whisky burn so well.

Some women preferred to wash the whisky away with water before closing the wound, but not Jordan. The liquor itself did incredibly well in helping heal wounds and preventing infection, so she left it on and took her threaded needle and began to sew up the laceration. She worked quickly, knowing the pain was unbearable and was continually amazed that the soldier had yet to utter one word. She had seen men scream and faint in similar situations.

When she was finally finished, she laid a strip of clean linen the length of the wound and bound him twice about the thigh to hold it in place; once at the top of his leg and once near the knee. She worked so fast that she knew she was not doing a very good job. She just wanted to be done with

her charitable act hurriedly, lest she be discovered. She was increasingly concerned that her aunts and cousins would come looking for her. She knew that jostling him about must be excruciating, yet he had not so much as flinched.

Only when she had stopped completely did he turn his head back to look at her, and she swallowed at the agony she read in his eyes. She found new respect for this Englishman who bore his pain with stoic silence. She began to hope that he would live, although she did not know why. She furthermore wished she had done a better mending job on his leg, taking the time she took with her own wounded.

"I dunna know what good I have done for ye," she said quietly.

He grasped her soft hand tightly in his clammy one. Jordan stiffened, startled by the action and fighting the urge to yank her hand away.

"You are an angel of mercy," he whispered. "I thank you for your efforts, my lady. I shall do my best not to betray them."

His sincerity was gripping. Gently, she removed her hand and put her things away. The half-moon was high above and the scattered clouds had disappeared, bathing the land in a silver glow. Jordan felt as if she had done something good this night, albeit to the enemy and she felt better now than she had earlier when she first descended to the stream. Mayhap fate had led her to the stream purposely to find the soldier and tend him. She suddenly felt like returning to the battlefield to continue with her expected duties.

"I must return, English." She rose and gave him a long look. "I will forget that I saw ye here."

She turned to leave but he stopped her.

"My name is Sir William de Wolfe," he said with quiet authority. "Remember it, for I shall return one day to thank you properly and I do not wish to be cut down while bearing a gift."

It took a moment, but even in the moonlight he saw her face go white and her jaw slacken.

"*Sweet Jesu,*" she gasped. "Surely ye're not the English captain they call *The Wolf*?"

He looked at her, sensing her surge of fear. He sighed; he did not want her to fear him. This was the one time when he wished his reputation had not preceded him.

"I simply said my name was de Wolfe, not *The Wolf*," he murmured.

She looked extremely dubious. "But ye were in his command?"

He shrugged vaguely. "Now, back to what I said," he said, shifting the subject. "I will return with a proper reward for you. Will you accept it?"

She could not be sure that the knight wasn't, in fact, the hated Wolf, but it was truly of no matter now. It was done. Perhaps she did not want to believe he was the hated and feared devil, so she chose to believe as such. How could she live with herself if it was discovered that she had tended to the man that had killed more kinsmen that she could count? She knew she could not, so she forced herself to believe his words. Furthermore, her aunt had said *The Wolf* was dark and devilish. This man was uncannily beautiful in a masculine sense.

After a moment's pause, she finally spoke. "English, if ye survive this wound then I will gladly accept yer gift."

He smiled weakly, deep dimples in both cheeks and her heart fluttered strangely in her chest. He was indeed the most handsome man she had ever seen, even if he was English. But she had the most horrible lurking feeling that he was indeed who she feared he was. It made her want to run.

"Luck be with ye," she said as she abruptly turned and trudged back up the hill.

William watched the figure in the billowing cloak, his pain-clouded mind lingering on the silken hair and beautiful face. He had never seen such a fine woman. *Angel* was certainly an apt term. If she were to be the last person he saw on earth then he would die a contented man.

He suspected that she did not believe his evasive answer but, thankfully, had made no more mention of it. The thought that she feared and hated him brought a curious tightness in his stomach that he quickly attributed to his helpless state. He did not want to admit that it might be regret.

He was growing weaker with each breath. His strength was waning as he leaned back against the

tree, wondering if he would again see the light of morning. He closed his eyes for he could not keep them open, and without realizing it, his mind drifted into unconsciousness, safe and warm and dark.