

CHAPTER ONE

December, 1273 A.D.

Cumbria, England

Castle Canaan

The echo of his tempered steel sword falling against the cold stone floor nearly scared her out of her skin. He thought it was rather amusing to see his wife jumping about, for she wasn't usually a skittish creature. But this morn was different; she was on edge and he was responsible for it.

Guilty, determined to ease her, he looked for a way. Bending over, he pretended to pick the blade up only to let it clatter to the floor again and again. The fourth time, however, she didn't start. She glowered at him.

"You are not amusing in the least."

He fought off a grin, sheathing his sword in the elaborate scabbard at his left side. "A pity you do not think so. Personally, I think I am rather entertaining."

His wife shook her head. "Of course, you would," she said sardonically. She shook her head again, though there was fondness twinkling in her eyes. "Whatever am I going to do with you, Nathaniel du Rennic?"

He only grinned in answer, his teeth gleaming behind his salt and pepper beard. She promptly ignored him by busying herself collecting the garments he had strewn across their massive bed. In truth, she was forcibly occupying herself so she that would not have to look at him standing before her in full battle armor. It only reminded her of what was about to happen. But she found the more of his clothes she collected, the heavier her heart became. The inevitable was about to happen and she had no way of stopping it.

Nathaniel watched his wife as she pretended to work. She was trying too hard. True, she had always been a strong worker, never afraid to busy herself with difficult or tedious chores, but he'd never seen anyone concentrate so much on folding wrinkled undergarments. The light from the rising sun filtered in through the gaps in the oilcloths covering the lancet windows, falling on her buttock-length hair, illuminating the honey-blond color into a myriad of vibrant hues.

God, she was such a young, lovely creature. Skin as soft as silk and round in all of the right places. Since the day he had married her eight years ago, on the eve of her sixteenth birthday, he had considered himself a most fortunate, grateful man.

Nathaniel didn't know how long he stood there, admiring her, waiting for her to bid him farewell. But somehow, he knew she would not make the first move to do so. She did not want him to go. When she passed close to him on her way to the wardrobe, he reached out and grasped her soft, white arm. Even through the leather gloves and chain mail, he could feel her trepidation.

"Avrielle, my dearest," he murmured softly. "You worry overmuch. Have I not always returned to you from battle? Have I not always come back to you, just as I have promised?"

Avrielle stared at the garments in her hands, refusing to look at her husband. Her throat was tight with tears and it was difficult to keep a rein on her anguish. "Aye, you've always come home," she agreed. It was all she had intended to say, but the carefully held dam of emotion suddenly burst and she dropped the clothing to the floor, throwing herself into his armored embrace. "But you've already done your duty for king and country. Why must they call you now to fight again? *Why?*"

He smiled into her silken hair, inhaling the faint rose fragrance. "What you mean to say is that I am too old to fight and my place is here, rotting in a comfortable chair before the hearth and watching our children grow into riotous young adults."

She growled with frustration and pulled away from him. She was deadly serious and he was making jokes. "You've already paid your dues, Nat," she said, frustrated. "You've always sided with the good of England, whether it was the king's pleasure or not. Even the king has sought your wisdom on many matters because he knows you are fair in all things. All England knows this as well. So why must you go to fight now for this silly cause? You've already proven your worth."

He smiled sadly at her, trying to grasp her hand but she pulled away. He caught her other hand and held it to his lips, his bristly beard scratching her tender skin. "Avrielle," he purred. "I must fight because my liege asks this of me. The barons are rebelling and...."

"The barons have been rebelling against the king for years," she insisted. "First Henry and now his son, Edward. And this most recent lot is simply a gang of anarchists. They go about burning and pillaging because they are fools. You cannot stop the rage of spoiled children."

He kissed her hand again. "They will listen to me."

"They will kill you."

He shook his head. "You are wrong," he said softly. "You said yourself that all of England knows of my fairness and wisdom. That is why Baron Bretherdale has asked me to ride with him. The rebelling barons are intent on attacking fortresses in the area that are loyal to our new king, Edward, and de Wolfe hopes that by flying my colors, it will cool the heated tempers of opposition."

Avrielle's pale blue eyes narrowed. "Scott de Wolfe," she growled as if repeating the name of something terribly vile. "Men call him the Black Adder, the viper of shadows and darkness. I have heard that he murdered his wife."

"He did *not* murder his wife."

"But he is a cold, unfeeling man."

"Mayhap that is true, but he is an excellent knight. The very best."

Avrielle wasn't happy in the least. "But what kind of a lord is he?" she said. "He cannot even hold his lordship without help from you."

"De Wolfe is a fair and just liege," Nathaniel said patiently. "I've never seen a finer knight in battle."

Avrielle snorted rudely. "I've been told he's as stupid as a post."

Nathaniel smiled faintly, amused. "Only jealous men speak so of him. He is learned and brilliant. His intellect and skill in battle is surpassed by none."

"If he is so great, then why does he need you?"

"I told you why. And I am honored by his favor."

She cocked a well-shaped eyebrow at him. "You would praise this man who would send you to your death?"

His smile broadened and he tried to grab her once again. "Of course I would praise him. Scott de Wolfe is certainly not a man I would choose to insult, not even within the privacy of my own bedchamber. The man is much like his father, the great Wolfe of the Border, William de Wolfe. Scott could engage Cuchulain, Beowulf, and Lancelot in mortal combat all at the same time and emerge the victor. But there is a rage behind his actions, something dark and deep that drives him. The things I've seen him do...."

He abruptly trailed off, stopped trying to chase her, and began hunting around for his cloak. It would seem that thoughts of Scott de Wolfe's war exploits had dampened his ever-present humor and Avrielle ceased evading him. She went to his side and tenderly touched his cheek.

"You fear him?" she asked softly. "Is that why you do this, because you fear him?"

His smile made a quick, forced return. "De Wolfe? Of course not. But I would not want to be the man's enemy."

"What have you seen him do?"

"Do?" he shook his head, putting his hand over her warm fingers, still on his cheek. "Nothing I should discuss with my lady wife."

Her pale eyes were serious. "Tell me, Nat. I would know of this man you risk your life for."

His smile faded. "He is a de Wolfe. Need I say more?"

"You did not answer my question."

He sighed faintly; Avrielle was not a typical woman, willing to be submissive when bade. She was curious, and smart, and at times very demanding. But he loved her regardless. He kissed the palm of her hand and threw his cloak over his shoulders.

"What de Wolfe has done in the heat of battle would give you nightmares for the rest of your life," he said, his light mood morphing into something serious and thoughtful. "He did not murder his wife, Avrielle. She was killed almost four years ago in an accident along with two of de Wolfe's children. I did not serve the man at the time, you recall, so what I am telling you comes from men who did. But those men say before their deaths, he used to be a man of great humor and warmth. He was well-loved by all. But after their deaths...."

He trailed off, shrugging, but Avrielle was hanging on his every word. "What happened?"

Nathaniel sighed faintly, perhaps wondering what would ever become of him should he lose his wife and children.

"Sometimes, a thing like that is just too much for a man to bear," he said quietly. "De Wolfe wandered for months until his father, in desperation, reached out to King Henry, who brought the man to London where he served Henry directly for the last year that the king was alive. Henry gave him a title and lands, and Ravenstone Castle as part of those lands. Even so, Scott still seemed to wander, rarely at the castle he manned for his father, Wolfe's Lair, and rarely at Ravenstone. He simply... wandered. But some say that Scott underwent a physical transformation as well... from what I've heard, he was always a powerful knight, but he lost himself in training and battle during this time and emerged as a beastly man, enormous and scarred and hardened. I have seen him in battle and suffice it to say that his sword is almost a useless instrument to him. What de Wolfe does, he does with his bare hands. There is such rage in his actions."

Her long-lashed eyes widened as she listened to the sad tale of a man's tragedy. She felt pity for him. "Truly?"

He nodded shortly and kissed her on the cheek, now trying to lighten the heady mood. "Truly." Taking her hand, he led her to their chamber door. The old panel creaked open, revealing a long, smoky corridor beyond. "Are you ready to bid me a fond farewell now?"

Tears stung her eyes but it was not her nature to show her emotions so openly. Later, in the privacy of her chamber, she would cry for him. Right now, her husband needed her strength.

Dutifully, she kissed him. It wasn't as if they hadn't done this before, hundreds of times over the past eight years. It was almost a routine; she begged him not to go, he made light of her concerns and, in the end, he always returned to her as he said he would. In all the years that they had been married, he had never even been injured beyond moderate scrapes. She had no reason to worry overly but, for some reason, this time was different.

“Godspeed, Husband,” she murmured, feeling his beard tickle her soft cheek. “I shall pray for your safe return.”

His ready smile appeared, one last time. “If all goes as it should, I will be home in two or three days.”

She was so worried for him that her stomach hurt. “Until the next time de Wolfe calls you.”

His smile faded and he stroked her cheek. “Does it truly disturb you so? I’ve been fighting since you were a babe, you know. I am rather good at it.”

She closed her eyes and a small, mutinous tear splashed onto her cheek. She quickly wiped it away, but not before he saw it. “I would rather have you home, with me. And the children need their father; so does the child I carry. I want him to know you, Nat. I do not want our children growing up without you.”

He was touched by her tears. He had been a warrior for so long that he almost knew of no other way. But to keep Avrielle happy, he would do most anything. He did so want to grow old beside her. Tears from his wife were an unusual thing, so much so that he chose to take her concerns seriously this time. Perhaps he was getting too old for this; perhaps he should think on retirement after all.

“Very well,” he sighed after a moment, patting her gently rounded belly. “If it means so much to you, I shall bring it up to de Wolfe. Perhaps he can do without me after this one last campaign.”

A light of hope appeared in her eyes. “Truly? You would do this?”

He kissed her sweetly on the lips. “For my beautiful Avrielle, I would do anything.”

He left her standing in the corridor, as was their usual parting custom. He didn’t like her down in the great bailey of Canaan, choking in the dust from hundreds of soldiers. Avrielle watched him disappear down the stairwell before going back into her chamber and peeling back the oilcloth from one of the long lancet windows. There she stood until her husband and his party of four hundred men rode from the bailey, out across the drawbridge and into the green countryside beyond. The standards of red, silver and blue for the House of du Rennic flew steadily in the early morning breeze until they disappeared from sight. Then, and only then, did Avrielle move away from the window.

And then, only then, did she cry.