

SALVATION

The Sword and the Cross Chronicles

By Olivia Rae

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Chapter One

For the woman which hath a husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband.

Romans 7:2

England, Near Derby, Spring 1186

"Lady Durville, I cannot leave. I have been sent by your brother, Julian to give you aid. Running a keep alone is not an easy task for a woman."

Breanna studied the man before her. He had sandy brown hair and eyes of copper that matched his skin which had been tanned from spending years in the Outremer. His wide shoulders, lean waist, and strong stance bespoke a man not much older than she,

mayhap seven or eight and twenty summers at the most. But when he held out his hands, they were etched with the rough calluses and lines of a much older man, and told of his true profession.

"Tell me why my brother would send a warrior to help run my lands? What would you know of livestock and planting?"

"Lady Durville. I am not a knight, nor do I claim to be one. But I am indeed qualified to be of service to you."

Quite an arrogant statement from a man who clearly ventured to the Holy Land to seek his fortune, did he think her a simpleton? She grew up around the sword, her father constantly instructing her brothers in the art of war. Why, 'twas impossible to walk through the family courtyard without being pulled into their combat games; she knew a fortune hunter when she saw one.

Nay, Julian did not send this man to assist in farming. He sent this man for her safety now that her husband had died, leaving her with child. Breanna placed a hand over her womb. She had survived the last three months by herself. Julian had overstepped his boundaries. She did not need this man's help.

She dropped her hand to her side. "Save your words, Canbush. You will need your breath for your long journey back to my brother. Tell him, your services were not needed."

"Canwell, my lady. My name is Royce Canwell." He bowed his head slightly as if to make his bold correction acceptable. "But

I can help you. I know much about sheep, cows, goats, and the planting of grain, oats, and barley. Before I left for the Holy Land, I helped my father and brothers work the fields."

Ah, there it was. He was indeed a man after some gain. "Of course you did. I am sure your modest living prepared you for that which you were born to, but Durville is a large holding, I am guessing at least twenty times the size of your father's?"

She watched as he clenched his teeth in a tight smile, giving her confirmation. He was lowborn and the lands his father worked were probably not his own. God forgive her, but the thought gave her much pleasure. As she had heard often at Mass, "Pride goeth before a fall," and Canwell, with his brown hair threaded with gold, his chin held high, and the look of pure dominance in his eyes, was certainly filled with the pride that Father James spoke of.

Boldly, Canwell took a step toward her. "Lady, I can assure you I have enough knowledge of these matters to manage lands of any size. I swore an oath to your brother."

"You and a hundred others most likely. I pray he does not send more to my door." Breanna shielded her eyes as the sun crept higher in the sky. This morn she needed to plan meals, oversee the making of butter and ale, pay debts, and settle disputes. If she did not hurry the noontide meal would be late, giving some of the sluggards at Durville a reason not to finish

their appointed tasks.

"Good sir, I have no quarrel with you, but I have been running these lands with my husband for five summers and when he took ill this winter and later passed on, I took care of things without a man's help. So you can return to my brother with a clear conscience."

Canwell dropped his gaze to the dirt. "Lady, he is in the Holy Land and my service there is done. I wish not to see it again. And you will have other matters to attend to very shortly."

Heat rose to Breanna's cheeks. How dare he be so bold? She placed her hands on her hips and paced back and forth, trying to gain her composure. Her gaze slipped to the hilly peaks which gave fine protection to Durville Keep. No enemy could descend from them without warning. Another reason she did not need a man familiar with a sword. "I will overlook your audacious tongue as you are my brother's friend, but you will not speak of my circumstance again."

She ended her statement with a healthy glare. He bowed slightly, but finally, did not utter a single word of protest.

"You are not a Templar given up the order?" she asked.

"No lady, I came to know your brother when I was on a pilgrimage. He saved my sister and me from a group of Assassins. From then on, I vowed to follow Brother Julian. He is the most

decent man I know."

Breanna sighed heavily and stopped pacing. She loved her brother, she really did. There was none as noble. She had agreed with Julian when he gave their homelands to the Church upon their father's tragic death. When he became a Templar she did not protest. But by all that was holy, could he not spend his time in prayer instead of attracting oaths from men like mice attract feral cats?

"I knew nothing of fighting until I met your brother. Through his teaching I learned how to fight and protect, but I never took a vow to the order."

Another confirmation of his birth, but one the Templars would have overlooked had he decided to pick up the white tunic and red cross of Christ. There had to be another reason he did not join. She gave a mental shake. The reason was none of her concern.

"I can assure you, I am a man of peace. I will not bring harm to your home. Please lady, I have a good head for figures and, thanks to your brother, I know script and can put words to parchment."

"Then perhaps you can use these skills to help your own family, for truly sir, I have these talents myself and no need for another's."

Distress etched his face. "Lady, my family's fate is

sealed. They work the land for a lord. I have three other brothers who help my father."

Well, there it was, an admission to his lineage. To his credit, he did not try to lie. "I see, and you think you can secure a place within these walls?" Breanna circled around him. Mayhap he could be trained as a smithy; after all, Giles was getting long in the tooth. She shook her head. Nay. Something deep within told her being a smithy would not be enough for this man, and she had no desire to ever have a man, under any circumstances, in her life again. Best to send him on his way. "To help, I will add my word to my brother's about your skill and character."

"Lady, you do not know me."

"True. But I know my brother and he would not have sent you if you were of an evil bent. With my word added to his, I am sure you will find service soon enough. Or if you are as you claim, a peaceful man, then mayhap you will seek a monastery and fill your days with prayer."

"Nay lady, I believe God has given me a different calling." His brow wrinkled as if he had more to say, but chose to keep silent. Clearly there was a secret and only God, and maybe Julian, knew what it was. Unfortunately that thought did not ease her mind, but made her more wary.

"Indeed. Well then, you may stay the night and sup with

us."

The look of arrogance that held his eyes earlier was swept clean with the knowledge that she was not going to relent. "Lady I cannot--"

The rumbling of hooves from the hills drew their attention. Breanna did not need to shield her eyes from the sun this time to know who descended. The black and gold banner carried the seal of a man she loathed more than any other. Godwin de Beaufou. She sighed heavily. Saying all those prayers this morn had not kept the devil from her door.

Usually Godwin showed up but once a year, in the dead of winter, when no one could escape his dreary presence. That he came again, three months later, could only bode trouble.

"It seems you will be having more guests, my lady." Canwell tipped his head towards the entourage.

"Yea, it would seem so."

It did not take long before Lord de Beaufou and his men were upon them. Dressed in a long black tunic with a sword belt of gold at his hip, one might think Sir Godwin was the king of England instead of King Henry. As Godwin dismounted she could have sworn Canwell chuckled when he got a full view of Godwin's gold chausses. It did seem overly much that a man should go prancing across the countryside with his legs wrapped in gold, but that was Godwin, always at the center of attention.

He bowed gracefully and stood, brushing a hand across his short-cropped, black beard. "Ah, my dear cousin, but I think you have grown more beautiful since the last time I have been here. Being with child must agree with you. Yet, how you must grieve over the loss of your husband."

Breanna fought not to roll her eyes. Her late husband's cousin should have been a troubadour. "Your kind words are truly a balm. I did not expect to have the pleasure of your company so soon, since you were here less than a fortnight before my husband's death."

Godwin brushed the dust of his journey from his raven hair. "Aye, but that will change. I cannot in good conscience leave a defenseless widow with child on her own with such a large estate to run. It would be very uncharitable of me if I should turn away when you are in need."

Another male come to save the helpless female. She knew it was wrong to question God's will, but she raised her eyes to the heavens anyway. With a deep breath, she dropped her gaze to Godwin's dark eyes. "How kind of you, cousin, but have no fear, all is well here. Not much has changed since Lord Durville's death." She wanted to add that things had actually improved, but she knew that would not be proper.

"I would still feel better if I could see for myself how things fare here." Without invite, Godwin dismissed most of his

men to the stables and proceeded to the hall.

Breanna quelled the urge to stamp her foot and order the pompous twit off her lands, but by law, if her child was a female this land would be his. She would have to bide her time and pray that God would be merciful and send her a son. But if not, she would petition the king to give her control of this land. A dangerous game, but one she was willing to play if it gave security to her child's future.

"Very well cousin, I was just going to see to the noon meal and then I will show you there is naught to worry about at Durville."

He stopped and turned. "I am sure I will find very little amiss. Your days of carrying this heavy burden are coming to an end. I am here now." He reached out and boldly touched her cheek.

How dare he be so familiar? Breanna jumped back and almost collided with Canwell's chest. She turned to find him less than a hand behind her. His brows were wrinkled; a deep scowl creased his face. There was no doubt that if Canwell had a sword in his hand he would have thrust it into Sir Godwin's chest. So much for being a man of peace, though at this moment she was glad for his attitude.

Godwin looked Canwell in the eyes and Breanna was certain nothing good could follow. She cleared her throat and

immediately Canwell stepped away. "How long do you plan to stay, cousin?" she asked.

Without acknowledging the other man, Godwin turned his attention back to her and flashed the bright smile that had made many a maid swoon. It had no effect on her whatsoever. "At least a fortnight. Mayhap longer. I want to make sure all is in order before I am wed."

Elation filled Breanna, and she hoped that his new bride would keep him occupied and away from Durville for many a year. Mayhap he had come to tell her that he had no interest in her holding and he would let her be, even if her child proved to be a girl.

She led him to the hall. "I did not know you were planning such a joyous occasion. When will it take place?"

"Not long now since Lent has passed and, of course, when my bride has had enough time to morn her departed husband and give birth to her first child."

Her stomach flopped to her toes and a tingle of dread spread through the rest of her body at the similarity to her own circumstance.

His shifty smile grew wide. "I cannot sleep knowing that you are here struggling all alone. What kind of man would I be not to ease your suffering? I think we should be wed as soon as you are able to fulfill a wife's duties."

Tightness squeezed her throat. She wobbled slightly. But then a rush of anger spiked in her. How dare he. She was not some silly maid. She was a woman who would never consent. He had to know this. What trickery was he about?

"Sir Godwin," she said firmly. "I do not need a husband."

He held up a hand. "Hush, my dear. I know you hide your worry under a false strength, but once we are settled your happiness will bloom and, mayhap, Durville will have the heir it deserves."

Before she could answer, Canwell stepped to her side. "You are too bold, sir. These things should not be discussed in front of the whole keep."

Godwin's waspish grin dissolved. His hand flexed above his sword. "Who is this that presumes to speak to me?"

If she did not act quickly, Canwell would be worm's food, for it was well known that if a man opposed Lord Godwin de Beaufou, his earthly days would be short. "This is my steward, Master Royce Canwell. He has been of great assistance to me since Lord Durville's death. He is the reason all is well here."

Godwin sized up Canwell again and, by God's grace, must have still found him lacking, for Godwin moved his hand away from his sword. Breanna released the breath she was holding.

Praise be to God!

"I will overlook your words because my lady holds you

highly, but do not think her favor will protect you. If you ever uttered such nonsense again, you may well lose your tongue."

Canwell acquiesced with a slight nod. He did not call out her lie, which was quite prudent. If he thought his silence would seal a position here, he was mistaken. For as soon as Godwin took his leave, Canwell would follow. Once Godwin saw she was determined not to wed, things would return to their normal state, at least for a while.

"Shall we proceed?" She waved to the hall entry; Godwin and a few of his knights followed while Canwell trailed behind. She called for ale, cheese, and bread. A trestle table was brought forward and Godwin and his party settled in. She took a seat near him, mentally ticking off all the things that would not get finished this day. Canwell stood in the shadows, his gaze keenly on her guest. She almost ordered him to see to the livestock, but after one look at Godwin and his lecherous gaze she decided it would be best if Canwell stayed.

Without wasting a moment, Godwin lifted a mug to his lips, and when done he wiped away the amber liquid with the back of his hand. He tore off a piece of bread and chewed, his gaze venturing around the hall, then hoisted his feet up onto the table as if he were already the lord of this keep. "I must say, I am surprised. Things truly are fine here. The rushes are clean, the hearth swept, wood chopped and stacked, and not a

scrap of meat or bone is thrown about. Not a man lies idle." His gaze narrowed. "Except for your steward, he hovers like a dog waiting for a treat."

Godwin threw a piece of bread at Canwell. Yet he did not take offense. If nothing else, Canwell was a man of great patience. Something she hoped he could maintain until Lord de Beaufou grew bored and left. Godwin laughed and turned his attention back to her.

"I am glad things have not fallen into disarray. It will make my task all the easier."

"Sir, what task could you possibly have? Durville is in good hands and I will make sure her people do not suffer. Though I am flattered, I am not tempted by your proposal. My husband has not been in the grave long. It will be years before I marry again, if ever. So please accept my apology, for it is meant with all kindness and sincerity."

Godwin took another large pull from his cup then quietly placed the mug on the table. "Lady Briana." He leaned forward so only she could hear. "I have come to stop the wagging of tongues. To protect your virtue."

Breanna's back stiffened. His words were odd and boded no good. "What do you mean? I am a widow with child there is nothing amiss here."

Canwell must have sensed something was wrong for he pushed

off the post where he was leaning and stepped into the light of the hall.

But Godwin would not be deterred, his eyes gleaming with danger. "Some question your child's parentage. That Sir William Durville is not the father."

"What? Who would say such a thing?" Though even as she asked, she knew the culprit sat next to her.

"My dear cousin, you said it yourself. I was here but a fortnight before your husband's death. Gossip has it that your womb carries my child." He covered the smile spreading across his lips by taking another drink.

A wave of nausea swept through her. She had missed her flow twice before Godwin had entered the keep this past winter. Who would spread such a vile lie? The dread she felt earlier came rushing forward and swirled about her like an unrelenting storm.

Canwell stepped forward. "My lady, are you all right?"

Godwin's hand flashed out like a striking serpent before coming to rest on the table. "Of course she is fine. Hold your tongue, knave."

Breanna placed a hand on Godwin's. "Forgive him. He is used to seeing to my welfare since Sir William's death. Master Canwell means no offense."

For a moment, she thought Canwell would protest, but then

he bowed and stepped back into the shadows. Yet she knew his hard gaze watched her every move.

"Sir Godwin, surely these rumors will cease in time. For all know I was a God fearing wife and would never betray my husband in such a way."

"Nay, my dear, that is not the case at all. Even before Sir William's death your bold actions had sent tongues wagging."

He tried to provoke her. She straightened her back. She would not give way to his slippery words. "How do you mean, sir? I have never heard such things."

"Think on it. You lead Mass with prayers and Psalms when Father James is gone. You insist that all who go to Mass say the prayers in English instead of Latin. Plus, you put benches in the chapel. Unheard of! Sitting in the presence of the Lord."

"I only did so because Father James can be quite...well he does drone on at times. There are those who attend Mass that are not so young anymore. I only thought to their comfort."

Godwin raised his hand. "My lady, God is not interested in our comfort, only our hearts."

And Godwin's heart was black indeed. "This is foolishness." She rose to leave, but he circled her wrist with his hand.

"There is more. Some say you had a hand in your husband's death. There has been talk that you are a witch."

A *witch!* Who would say such a thing? Godwin's eyes sparkled

with what could only be interpreted a mirth. He was enjoying her discomfort and was no doubt the source of such vile rumors.

"These are lies. And all who know me would not believe them."

"Mayhap not here, but they have spread to court and I fear, there are many who do believe. Some say King Henry believes them."

Satan himself could not carry a more sinister smile than Godwin did at the moment. He had her cornered. If she did not marry him then he would gladly have her die as a witch before her child was even born.

She stood. The room started to spin and rock. Nay, she would not drop in front of this snake. Or mayhap she would. Her gaze swept to Canwell before she put a hand on her belly and another to her brow. She gave a low moan and stumbled forward, hoping Canwell was as smart as he claimed to be.

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