

# Chapter 1

*1 May 1317*

**T**he land lies beneath a heavy darkness, the moon but a sharp sliver in the western sky. The man moves slowly, bent like a yew beneath a heavy sack, his face lost under the brim of his great hat. He is afraid the sack will betray him, its bare patches threatening to reveal the terrible thing he has done. That he had to do. But it is too late to remedy that now. He must trust to the darkness and the fear he means to sow.

He glances towards the mighty gate set in the town's walls, still closed to keep Berwick's inhabitants safe from the marauding Scots outside even as dawn approaches. Fixing his mind on the next step, he tells himself he must not speak more than necessary.

'Who is it?' A shape shifts on the wall.

'Richard Heron.'

The shape comes down a few steps, taking on the form of a

*man with a spear. 'And who's Richard Heron, and what's he doing breaking curfew?'*

*'I work for Ralph Holme.'*

*'What? I can't hear you.'*

*'Ralph Holme.' He pushes the sack further on to his shoulders. 'I have a mad dog in here.'*

*'Ralph Holme, did you say?'*

*'Yes. I have a mad dog . . .'*

*Another man, much broader, rushes to join the first. 'Then get it out of here.'*

*The first man scuttles down, averting his gaze, as if that will protect him. He removes the great wooden bar holding the gate in place and pushes it away from him with a grunt.*

*The man with the sack smiles, still bent low. He moves carefully, one step, then another, muttering his thanks. He knows they will remember he went out very early beyond Berwick's walls. They might even remember his name. But they will not know who he was. The great gate bangs shut behind him.*

*He has many hard steps ahead of him under the weight of the sack. It is a burden he was willing to take as soon as he knew what needed to be done. Evil is spread widely abroad these days, and he knows what he did was evil too. But he is sure it was the lesser of the two.*

*One month earlier . . .*

*'God's teeth, will you stop singing!' Sir Edmund twists in his saddle to growl at me, the tip of his nose livid in the frigid air. I hadn't realised I was singing out loud, for I know how much it irks him, but it helps to coax a little*

cheerfulness out of the day. The cold moves through me, taking root. I can barely feel my fingers clutching the reins, but I risk a sharp slap across the cheek if I cannot stop my teeth from chattering in time to the music in my head.

‘Useless,’ Will mouths at me.

I feel the weight of my stupidity like a millstone round my neck. But I will not let them see it.

Though this is England, it is our enemies the Scots who are most at home here. It is whispered they are devils who can move from valley to valley in an instant, trailing the smell of sulphur behind them. And they do not need to coax fire, like honest men. One glance from the Black Douglas and a house or barn will glow with a white heat. But these are just peasant superstitions and I know better.

A heron rises with a terrible screeching from the river to our left, and my heart shudders long after I see what it is. We enter a wood, the grass studded with violets and stitchwort and I am thinking it would make a nice bed for a weary traveller when Sir Edmund raises a hand. After a moment we trot on, our mounts fretful. The wagon toils behind us, Ade the driver keeping his curses to himself for once.

The silent oaks and skittish birches huddle close now, pushing away the light. In a small clearing, a young deer with a stub of antlers lifts its head and darts away, the light touch of his hooves smothered by a heavy thunder. And then we see them, riders snapping branches, cleaving the air with their cries. I struggle with my scabbard, jerking my sword free as Morial lifts his head, pulling at

the reins. I pull back, pressing my calves hard into his flanks, and he settles with a sharp whinny.

Like a tide, they are upon us. I see only the front rider, black curls jerking against pale skin, glittering fire in his dark eyes. Someone shouts 'England!' but all else is the clang of steel on steel. Raising my sword, I feel a blade scrape the air beneath my armpit and then the riders are through in a great breath of wind. 'A Douglas, A Douglas,' they cry. I see now they are only three fighting men, the same as us.

'Don't let them get around!' Sir Edmund is screaming, but I don't know what he wants me to do. I turn Morial, but another rider is almost upon me. I swing my sword up and it flies out of frozen fingers, curving away with serene grace. The world shatters into an insistent throbbing in my ears as I wait for Death to claim me.

The rider drops his blade arm with a scream as blood spatters my face. 'Damned fool!' Sir Edmund's blade runs as red as his face turned furiously towards me.

The riders head towards the wagon, slicing at the canvas. The pale man with black hair seizes a flagon of wine, jerks out the stopper with his teeth and drinks deep as they gallop off. We sit entirely still. Then Sir Edmund draws his arm back and hits me so hard I am thrown off my horse. I lie on the soft ground and imagine the flowers coiling around me, their fragrance lulling me to sleep.

'Get up.' Sir Edmund looms above me before spurring on his horse.

I pull out my sword from a foul-smelling morass and wish I were dead, just to spite them.



Some hours later we sit before a much bigger river running black and deep. I want to ask Sir Edmund about the man with the pale face and burning eyes, but by the look on his face, I risk another blow if I venture any questions. The wagon lurches down the slope and on into the river, Ade's arm rising and falling with his whip, the oxen's flanks trembling. 'Go, go, go!' cries Sir Edmund, jerking his red face at Will and me. 'Or are you waiting for a Scottish blade up your arses?'

Will leaps into the river with a triumphant 'Ha', his horse kicking up great plumes of water. Morial tosses his head as I dig my heels into his flanks. The water is freezing cold, but there is something exhilarating about driving through it. In only a few moments we scramble up the far bank, grins on our faces, horses shaking and stamping. Companies of reeds along the riverbank shiver in an icy breeze, but otherwise all is quiet, distant fields lifeless under a pallid sun. The good Lord knows there should be more signs of spring, but we are now in Scotland, a sinful, forsaken place.

The others ride on. I linger a moment to watch the ducks return to the rushing waters of this river they call the Tweed. A dipper flits on to a rock and disappears below the surface. With a sigh, I stroke Morial's black head and urge him on.

In truth, this Scotland is little different to the country we have toiled through since leaving Sir Edmund's lands in Yorkshire. All is bleak and mournful, full of wild

mountains, its people as sodden and filthy as the ground they till. The very air feels thin, as if intent on conserving what little strength it possesses. I try to conjure up black-thorns frothing with white blossom, or woods carpeted with celandine gold back home in Lincolnshire. But they seem no more real than the gardens of Jerusalem or Araby.

A shout goes up as riders gallop towards us from the east, still an agitated clump at this distance. We sit, set to stone, as they become faces and limbs. Sir Edmund spits on the ground. 'It's Wysham. That's his banner.'

The company draws up in front of us, Sir John Wysham – captain of the Berwick garrison – at its head. 'Do you have news of Arundel?' He greets Sir Edmund with a kiss. 'I thought he was going to cut down the great forest at Jedburgh and flush Douglas out.' He is pale and thin, with a reedy voice that makes him sound peevish. I suppose he has no reason to feel cheerful. Though the old king – father of the Edward who rules us now – conquered all of Scotland when its fiendish inhabitants rebelled some twenty years ago, God has seen fit to deprive England of all but Berwick, which means we must have sinned most grievously.

Sir Edmund frowns. 'You haven't heard? Arundel crossed the border more than a week ago.' We met the earl's company by chance on his way south, as we rode north. It was not a happy meeting.

Sir John grunts. 'What goes on even half a day's ride from Berwick is a mystery to us.'

'Then I have bad news. A few boys in Arundel's army decided to surprise Douglas at his house at Lintalee.

But that devil's scouts saw them coming, and he left the door wide open and a feast ready for eating. So that's just what they did.'

Sir John's eyelids flutter. 'What?'

'They sat down and ate. But the Scots came back. Killed more than a score of them.'

Sir John slumps into his saddle like an empty sack.

'Arundel was still back towards the border.' Sir Edmund sighs. 'Douglas didn't run away, of course he didn't. It was a trap. Those fools set no guard and he had them like rats in a barrel. And then he came for the main company. I don't think Arundel even knew he was there.' His eyes narrow. 'We met Douglas ourselves . . .'

Sir John's face twitches. 'Where?'

'Just beyond Ford.'

'What was he doing? There should be no raids till the end of the truce.'

Sir Edmund shrugs. 'There were only three of them. Perhaps he has a whore nearby.'

Sir John gives a tight smile and turns his horse around. 'Let's get out of here.'

Now I know that the pale man with black curls really was the Black Douglas, a fiend just like his master, Robert Bruce, who calls himself King of Scotland. We climb a long, tedious hill, the river out of sight. The sky seems altogether vast but quite empty, as if God and the saints have left the heavens.

Will stirs at my side. 'He should have let that Scottish dog have you, Book Boy. You're as much use with a sword as a girl.'

'God will strike you down, just you wait. He will come when you least expect it and He will leave you in torment for the rest of your days.' I sound exactly like Brother Arnold berating the novices.

Will snorts. 'No, He won't.'

'Yes, He will.'

'God's teeth!' Sir Edmund turns and shakes his head, thankfully too far ahead to hit either one of us. 'I've met cockerels with more wit than you two.'

I shut my eyes and imagine myself back in Gloucester Abbey, the 'Deum Verum' rising and falling like a silken tide against the quiet stonework. I mouth the words, searching for the touch of God's infinite mercy to soothe my wretched heart in such barbarous company.

The river catches up with us and at last we glimpse a pale tower and the roofs of houses crouched behind a wall of stone and timber, all that will keep us safe from the savages outside. 'Shut us up tight now,' Sir John says to the men guarding a huge gateway. We pass through, the great wooden doors scraping the ground before closing with a mighty thud. Our journey is over, for better or worse.



We trot through a mess of houses on either side, pass beneath another great gateway and are finally in the town. I have heard that Berwick is a noble port, for all it is in

the north, and much wealth sails in and out of it. In a broad street Sir John calls Marygate, we pass some fine, well-plastered houses two or three storeys high, their timbers in recent repair. But just as many are collapsed like old cripples, with gaping windows and holes in the roofs, gardens growing plentiful crops of decaying carts and piles of rope and broken pieces of wood. We stop in front of a large three-storey building, a patchwork of plaster giving it a rough look. An archway leads into a cobbled yard and the wagon trundles in. Leaving Will to gather Sir Edmund's gear from behind his saddle, I retrieve our master's chest from the wagon.

As I struggle up to the first floor, a dumpy little man with flailing arms tells me he is our steward and points me up another staircase. In a low-ceilinged chamber at the top of the stairs, I put the chest down beneath the little window. Several panes are stuffed with rags and the wooden panelling on the walls is most ill-used, but it is a comfortable room, even if the fire seems almost bereft of coals. I find the bottle of vinegar in the chest and quickly clean Sir Edmund's sword, which lies over a stool. I can do no more without a candle or proper daylight. Putting it back in the scabbard, I spit on the leather to loosen the mud and the blood, scratching at it with my thumb.

Sir Edmund thrusts the door open and strides in. 'Where's Will? I need food.'

'Here I am.' Will is behind him, all smiles and carrying a large bowl of water. He rushes over to Sir Edmund, water sloshing dangerously near the edge of the bowl, and casts a disdainful look at me. 'You still have your boots on.'

‘Leave Benedict be. I’ve only just come in.’ Sir Edmund sits down in the chair by the fire. ‘I saw you hanging round the kitchen, cooing at that girl. You don’t waste any time, do you?’

I grin, but now he turns his great boulder of a face on me. ‘And you’ve nothing to feel clever about. Go and fetch your chest. The steward wants it out of the way.’

I run out, cheeks on fire, but can see nothing in the dark courtyard. After much searching, I find my chest abandoned in the shadows near the back door and drag it upstairs. The others have already gone to eat, and I follow them down to the hall on the floor below. Will has finished serving and sits towards the middle of a long table. Opposite him is a dark-haired fellow, plump and sweating. Sir Edmund is at the end, leaning his great head towards a handsome man of middle years who is telling him something that has him in his grip.

I slip into the seat next to Will, who turns a cold shoulder. A skinny boy ladles some broth into a piece of bread and I slurp it down, happy to be left to eat, even if there is little to taste. The dark-haired youth follows my every bite with his eyes. I pick up the remains of my bread and he sighs. ‘Do you want it?’ I hold it out.

He grabs it like a fat pigeon and begins to crunch and chew with his mouth half-open. I try the wine and nearly spew it out, it’s so bitter. The handsome man is still talking with violent hand gestures. I tap Will on the shoulder. ‘Who’s that?’

His shoulders convulse in an extravagant sigh, but he turns to me, as I knew he would, for he likes to know

things I don't. 'That, Book Boy, is Sir Anthony Lucy.'

'A very fine knight,' says the youth opposite, mouth crammed full.

'A very fine knight who was captured at Bannockburn,' Will says quickly. 'But not in the battle . . .'

'Was he?' I look at Sir Anthony again, the narrow set of his shoulders, the delicate cut of his jaw, but can find nothing there marking out such a terrible ordeal.

The plump fellow leans towards me, crumbs flying. 'It was in some castle with a Scottish dog in charge of it. He let them in after the battle and took them all prisoner. I'm Stephen. I suppose you're Benedict?'

I nod, trying to stay out of spitting distance.

'Sir Anthony is my master.' Stephen stares hard at me. 'Will says you're not a proper squire.' Will sniggers.

'I am now, whether I like it or not.'

'Well, you won't like it. Nobody does. There's nothing to do but stand on the walls, and the food's heinous.' Stephen belches, patting his stomach. 'We'll not stay long, I reckon. We're better off nearer home, in case there's trouble.'

My sister Elizabeth springs into my mind, bringing a chill to my guts, for his words remind me that the man my mother is married to now can do no more to protect them than wring his wizened hands. I already pray for Sir Edmund to find some proper occupation with regular pay back in Yorkshire, which is not so far from our lands in Lincolnshire. If I cannot return to the abbey, I might at least be nearer Lizzie.

Will slaps the table, glowering at Stephen. 'What kind

of cowardly talk is that! We're here to strike at the accursed Scots before they drive us into the sea. It's every Englishman's duty to fight and . . . and to . . . to . . .'

Stephen starts back as if he'd been whipped. I hold my breath, trying to think of something to say to bring harmony, as Master Aquinas teaches us, for his shoulders are shaking. And yet I see now it is not anger but mirth that has a hold of him. He laughs until tears dapple his cheeks. 'You're going to save England, are you? Well, I'm sure we'll all sleep soundly in our beds now.' He sits back. 'But I doubt your master is as foolish as you. Most of the knights here are either desperate for money or needing the king's pardon for some sin or other.'

I nod, speaking softly since I do not wish to be heard at the top of the table. 'I'm sure you're right. There is . . .' I hesitate, for I would not wish to be disloyal to my master. 'There's a good reason why Sir Edmund thought it prudent to enter the king's service.'

'Have you finished telling tales, Book Boy?' Will's loyalties are simple. But I suppose, since he has served Sir Edmund as page and squire, it is his affections that rule him, not his mind. I have been Sir Edmund's squire only this last, long half-year and can see things as they are.

The scraping of wood alerts us to the rising of our masters. They settle on chairs drawn around a dying fire and Sir Edmund waves us onto the floor beside them. A deerhound lying there like an unkempt carpet turns onto its back and Sir Anthony strokes its belly with his foot. 'How long do you think you'll stay?' he asks Sir Edmund.

I lean forward, not breathing. Our safe-conducts last until Midsummer, some two months away. I have prayed every day we will not stay longer.

'It depends what Arundel decides to do now. He needs to find a way to push Douglas back so we've a chance of taking Roxburgh once the truce is over. I don't want to sit here on my arse waiting for those dogs to creep up on us, but I need the money.'

Sir Anthony snorts. 'Don't we all! I've a ransom to pay.'

'Surely the king is bringing an army to Scotland, sir?' I do not mean to speak, but the question bursts out of me.

Sir Anthony gives me a long look. 'The king is always bringing an army north. Every year he orders a muster, and every year he cancels it. He has no money, not without parliament giving him a tax, and he won't do what they want to get it. We're on our own, and that's the truth of it.' He takes a long swig from his goblet. 'Have you served the king before?'

I shake my head. 'I am newly come to soldiering, sir.'

'How so?'

I hear Will snigger again, and Sir Edmund kicks him.

'I was supposed to be a clerk. To Sir William Martin.'

'The king's Justice in Wales?'

I nod.

'Then your family has good connections. Surely they could keep you away from here?'

'Sir William wished to honour a debt to my father for saving his life. He paid for me to go to school and my older brother Peter became his squire. But Peter . . . he went swimming last year and drowned.' I swallow

violent feelings. 'So, I had to take on his responsibilities. Sir William thought he'd done enough, and Sir Edmund is . . . very good to have me with so little training.' I sound ungrateful, I know. No one else would take me.

'Swimming,' Sir Anthony pronounces, standing up, 'is a very foolish thing to do. Forgive me – I was on third watch last night and am weary. But I'm glad you're here. We need more men-at-arms, not the tailors and shoemakers they've got up on the walls these days. Weston would have Percival up there if I let him.' He fondles the dog's ears. 'God help us if there's any fighting to be done.'

I am confused. 'I thought Sir John had charge of the garrison. Who's Weston, sir?'

'He's a John, too, but this one's a clerk, even if he calls himself Chamberlain of Scotland. That's the man with the money.' Sir Anthony strides away, still talking over his shoulder. 'Not that there is any. Forget Wysham. He only has eyes for Alice Rydale and the road out of here. It's Weston you should keep in with. But don't trust him and keep a close tally of what you're owed and what you get.' With this torrent of advice, he and his dog step swiftly through the door, Stephen running to catch up.

Sir Edmund stares after him. 'I hate clerks.' It's true. His own clerk, Thomas Fleet, made it only as far as Newcastle before succumbing to a violent ague that left his huge frame quivering like an old oak in a storm. My master looks at me and plucks his lower lip. 'I'll need one, though, till Thomas gets his fat arse up here. Someone good at all that bookish drivel. You can do it.'

Go to this Weston in the morning and don't leave till you're sure I'll be paid.' He stretches. 'I'm going to bed. Will, you can help me.'

Will smirks past and I let them leave. Stepping into the courtyard, I am assailed by the night's chill and hurry to the stables to bury myself in Morial's flanks. *Into your hands, O Lord.* I wait. An owl murmurs a nocturnal greeting nearby and I sense he is speaking to me, but not what message he brings. For I do not understand why the Lord has cast me into a life I do not want, and for which I am entirely unprepared.