

## CHAPTER ONE

*Year of Our Lord 1272*

*September*

*Twelve miles southwest of Castle Questing (over the Scots border)*

*Whoosh!*

A very large rock had sailed too close to his head and Troy immediately retaliated, managing to uppercut the Scotsman who'd tried to take his head off with a long dagger he'd pulled from a sheath concealed on his hip. It went straight into the Scotsman's neck, his preferred target, and the man fell heavily into the grassy sod. Blood gushed onto the sweet Scottish earth.

But Troy didn't stop there; he was a man of action and little rest, and once his opponent was down, he went after any man he didn't personally recognize as being English. There was much at stake in this battle, not the least of which was some peace along the Marches where his outpost, Kale Castle, was front and center during these turbulent times. It was an outpost of Castle Questing, his father's seat, and the first line of defense against the Scots in this area. It was a small but strategic tower castle that sat between Questing and Wolfe's Lair, his father's major outpost in the area. The de Wolfe holdings protected perhaps one of the most volatile stretches of the Scottish Marches.

In fact, that was what this particular skirmish was all about – subduing a particularly bad section of the border that was in rugged and mountainous land. A band of marauding Scots, an amalgamation of a few clans including Murray, Douglas, and Gordon, had been using a pele tower about twelve miles southwest of Castle Questing as a base from which to launch their raids. As far as his father had been able to determine, these *reivers* were not sanctioned by the clans they represented, but they were doing a great deal of damage and William wanted it stopped.

William's order to his armies had been to capture this base, called Monteviot Tower, and hold it for the English. He was tired of losing men and material to these raiders, so he wanted to end it once and for all. He had, therefore, called upon a rather large army to purge Monteviot of her marauders, so men from the castles of Northwood, Kale, Wark, Berwick, Questing, and Wolfe's Lair had moved on the isolated tower at dawn on a crisp autumn morning.

The Scots, taken by surprise, had been ill equipped to handle nearly two thousand English soldiers. So as the day neared the nooning hour, there were just a few pockets of holdouts, including the tower itself, where about forty Scots were holed up, keeping the English at bay.

But that wasn't going to last. While the younger knights secured the big bailey of Monteviot, the older and more wily – or sneaky - knights were planning the incursion into the tower. Even as Troy concentrated on purging the Scots from a big stone outbuilding that also seemed to be the stable, he could still see his father, his Uncle Paris, his Uncle Kieran, and his Uncle Michael at the base of the tower determining the best course of action to penetrate it.

It was an auspicious gathering. These men were legendary knights along the border... *William de Wolfe... Paris de Norville... Kieran Hage... Michael de Bocage...* names that meant something on the Marches because they were the names of the men who had survived decades of skirmishes. They'd fought together for over forty years and even though they were well into their advanced years, it didn't much slow them down. They still rode with their armies and they still participated in combat, although Troy and his brothers, Patrick and James, tried to keep their father out of heavy fighting while Paris' older sons, Hector and Apollo, attempted to do the same with their father.

Kieran had his own sons, Alec and Kevin, who tried to keep their mighty father from getting hurt, which resulted in him being grievously offended sometimes. Even Michael, quite possibly the tallest man on the borders, had three equally tall sons who tried to ease their father's load. But he, too, was insulted that they would even make the attempt.

Old knights who didn't want to be reminded of the younger, stronger generation.

Troy was the oldest of all the next-generation knights and, by virtue of his age and skill, was always the man in charge of the siege. Therefore, it was Troy who eventually put the older warriors on planning the breach of the tower. As he and Tobias de Bocage, Michael's eldest son, cleared out the stone outbuilding, Troy could see the elder knights congregating at the base of the tower in conference as they looked up the very tall, rectangular keep with small windows.

The apertures on the second level were barred with iron, making penetration impossible, but the levels above that – and there were at least two – had small windows for ventilation and light. It was a typical tower house, built for protection more than comfort.

There was, however, a roof where the Scots were gathering and throwing projectiles down on the knights. That was where most of the resistance was coming from.

Troy had been watching that standoff, intermittently, for the last hour. Fortunately, the older knights knew to stay out of the way. At some point, the Scots ran out of ammunition and began to throw things from inside the tower – broken bed frames, pots, stools – anything they could get their hands on. That’s how Troy and the others knew the end was near. Once the Scots started doing that, there was nothing left to fight with or to fight for. They would soon be starved out if their situation didn’t change.

Then, it became a waiting game.

With Tobias and a few other knights handling the final purging of the outbuildings, Troy finally broke away and made his way over to the older knights as they congregated below the tower. He flipped up his visor, gazing up at the gray-stoned structure just as the others were.

“Well?” he said, shielding his eyes from the bright sun overhead. “I have finished my task. The outbuildings are clear. Why haven’t you rushed the tower yet?”

William glanced at his son; big, muscular, and terrifying when he wanted to be, William was particularly proud of Troy. He had such an easy command presence and was much-loved by the men, mostly because they knew that Troy would fight or die for any one of them without question. A noble heart inspired great loyalty, and that was what Troy had – a heart that was as true as the day was long. But he was also easy to anger, could make rash decisions, would punch a man for looking the wrong way at him, and argumentative. Therefore, William knew the question out of his mouth wasn’t a jest in any way; knowing Troy, the man was serious.

“We were just discussing the tactics,” he said evenly. Then, he pointed at Paris, standing next to him. “Paris wants to burn them out.”

Troy glanced at Paris, who was also the father of his deceased wife. Paris de Norville was the commander of Northwood Castle, a tall, blond, arrogant but deeply compassionate man whom Troy had known his entire life. He looked at Paris as a second father. But Paris always thought he knew best, and he liked to question everyone’s decisions, which irked Troy terribly. Even now, he could see an expression on Paris’ face that suggested he didn’t approve of the current command opinion.

“If you burn it out, you will also have an outpost that no one will be able to use,” Troy pointed out. “It would give the *reivers* no haven to hide in.”

“And it would give me an outpost that was nothing more than a burned-out shell.”

“Then what do you want to do?”