



## *Chapter One*

*Scotland, 23 March 1306. The Road to Scone.*

THE ORANGE GLOW OF DAWN skimmed tufts of striated clouds in the eastern sky. But James Douglas hardly noticed. Neither did he pay heed to the icy breeze cutting through his mail and the quilted weave of the aketon beneath. Even the chausses covering his thighs were stiff from the cold. Surely the skies threatened a late snow, though James preferred to be nowhere else this day.

From a ridge overlooking the Glasgow road, he sat atop a fine palfrey, his breaths billowing a steamy grey. If only the horse were his and not a loan from Bishop Lamberton. But these were dark times and the name of Douglas had all but been smote from the nobility. One day, James intended to own a herd of gallant warhorses. Just as his father had before the wars.

Intently, he watched the road for movement. At last, his chance had come. And no matter how hot his impatient blood thrummed through his loins, he vowed to maintain his vigil and remain patient. Soon he would right the wrongs against his father and regain his lands.

And the time was nigh.

At last, a robust contender had come forward to claim the throne of Scotland, a man with cuds enough to pull together this great nation and send the English back across the border once and for all. And James fully intended to be at the center of the maelstrom.

After daylight had spread across the glen, a flicker of metal caught James' eye first, followed by the white blaze on the nose of a bay horse. He counted thirty riders creeping through the trees with a wagon and sentry in diamond formation at the rear. Not an impressive number for a king or even an earl, for that matter, but perhaps the small retinue would not attract as much attention as an army of five hundred or more.

Before he picked up his reins, James closed his eyes and turned his face to the heavens. *Dear God, I am not gifted with the silken eloquence of a holy man, but in my hour of need, please grant me the words to convey the strength of my fealty and the depth of my desire to ride at this man's side.*

Taking an earnest breath, he cued the palfrey down the incline and onto the road while the approach of horses thundered from around the bend. James dropped his reins and raised his hands, driving his mount with his knees.

At fifty paces, the retinue came into view. James grinned at the sight of Robert the Bruce in the lead—he would have assumed no less. By his reputation, the contender was no coward. And what a sight to behold. Clearly a warrior, Bruce presented an imposing image, his armor immaculate, a surcoat emblazoned with the rampant lion, a cloak of black, his shoulders broad. And to add to the picture, the nostrils of his enormous steed flared.

The men flanking Bruce drew their swords. "Halt!" bellowed one.

James relaxed his knees and let his horse amble to a stop. "James Douglas, son of William, Lord of Douglas, come to pledge my fealty to a worthy man who would be king."

"The lad's father surrendered at Berwick," growled the man on the right.

A shot of ire flared up James' neck, but he bit his tongue. Damnation, he was no lad.

The Bruce brushed his beard with gauntleted fingers. "I kent his father well. Lord Douglas surrendered the burgh and his life in good faith, intending to spare those within his garrison."

The man-at-arms smirked. “Little good that did.”

Grinding his molars, James slid from his horse. Now was not the time to debate the errs of his da. “I was but ten years of age when my father died in the Tower, his lands given to Clifford by a foreign king. *My lands. My birthright.*”

“I, too, have lost much at the hand of the usurper.” The Bruce urged his mount forward, though one of the men-at-arms followed. “Tell me, what news brought you to this place on this day at this time?”

James dropped to his knee and bowed his head. “My liege, since my father left this world, I have been an apprentice to Bishop Lamberton. Upon receiving your missive, he urged me to ride ahead and pledge my sword.”

“I don’t trust him,” growled the man-at-arms.

“Wheesht, Neil.” The Bruce dismounted, handed the naysayer his reins, and returned his attention to James. “You must forgive my brother. He is only looking out for my welfare.”

Giving a nod, James eyed the man before he returned his attention to His Lordship. “Very well. Though judging by his girth, I can easily best him in a battle of swords.”

“Strong words from an unproven pup. Perhaps a match can be arranged.” Bruce sauntered forward, cocking his head to one side. “Your beard is thick, though your face is that of an unblemished canvas. Pray tell, what is your age?”

As a sharp spike roiled in his gut, James clenched his fists. “I am a man of one and twenty, trained to wield a sword. I’ve not been bested by any knight in Lamberton’s court.”

“Indeed? And your claim can be substantiated by the bishop?”

“It can.” James rose. “I—”

“Watch yourself,” warned Neil.

The Bruce sliced his palm through the air but kept his eyes on James and one hand on the hilt of his sword. “Clearly, you were aware that I am headed for Scone. Why did you not wait to approach me there?”

Again demonstrating his vassalage, James spread his hands to his sides, though he didn’t kneel this time. “When news was received of Comyn’s death by *your* hand and the absolution granted to you by Bishop Wishart in Glasgow, I felt you needed my sword now whilst you are most vulnerable.”

“I assure you, my vulnerability will endure for months, possibly years to come.”

“Aye, until the English are expunged from Scotland once and for all.”

“I appreciate your verve, Douglas. Tell me, have you earned your spurs?”

“Not as of yet. I rather hoped being knighted would be an honor bestowed by my king.”

Chuckling, the Bruce turned toward his men. “Did you hear that? I’m liking this young man more by the moment.” He then placed a hand on James’ shoulder. “I should enjoy witnessing this sword of yours in action.”

“If I ride at your side, I pray to God you will see it raised often against our foe.”

“Then come.” The Bruce turned up his palm to catch a snowflake. “We have tarried here long enough.”

Find your copy online:

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B088P4YBZ6>

Apple: <https://books.apple.com/us/book/id1513502519>

Barnes & Noble: <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/highland-warlord-amy-jarecki/1137031116>

Kobo: <https://www.kobo.com/us/en/ebook/highland-warlord>

AmzCA: <https://www.amazon.ca/Highland-Warlord-Kings-Outlaws-Book-ebook/dp/B088P4YBZ6>

<https://www.amazon.ca/Highland-Warlord-Kings-Outlaws-Book-ebook/dp/B088P4YBZ6>

AmzUK: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Highland-Warlord-Kings-Outlaws-Book-ebook/dp/B088P4YBZ6>

AmzAU: <https://www.amazon.com.au/Highland-Warlord-Kings-Outlaws-Book-ebook/dp/B088P4YBZ6>

Google:

[https://play.google.com/store/books/details/Amy\\_Jarecki\\_Highland\\_Warlord?id=yPT0DwAAQBAJ](https://play.google.com/store/books/details/Amy_Jarecki_Highland_Warlord?id=yPT0DwAAQBAJ)