Chapter One

December 1292
Yester, Scotland

Thick, black smoke clogged the air as the thatched roofs on dozens of cottages burned. Villagers shouted or cried, and the sharp ring of clashing steel filled the air. Dougal de Gifford, fourth Laird of Yester, raised his sword to block the wide swing of one of the scoundrels raiding this village. He and several of his men had been inspecting nearby fields when word of the raid reached them. He'd raced here to save his people and found the village engulfed in flames with several dead.

Sweat trickled down his brow and stung his eyes. He blinked to clear them and blocked another hard swing. All around them, his people ran, trying to find refuge between the fighting and raging fires. Christ, he had to put an end to this attack swiftly. The clouds promised snow and his people would need food and shelter.

The raider growled and struck harder. He met the man's sword with a powerful swing, knocked the raider's arm wide, and thrust. The sword pierced the man's sparse armor with ease and he dropped to the ground, dead. Dougal spun to find his next opponent, fury curling in his belly over the senseless violence.

A score of men attacked the village. They carried swords and axes, but their gambesons looked thin with no chain mail. Most lay dead or dying around the village. Dougal brought just seven men besides himself, not expecting such numbers in the raiding party. He spotted one of his men down by a fence, his shoulder bleeding. The rest still fought.

An angry yell bellowed to his right and steel flashed in the sunlight. Dougal raised his sword right as the raider barreled into him, knocking him several steps back. Foul body odor and rank breath washed over him. Dougal choked and turned his face away, only to breathe in smoke. He coughed, then shoved the raider back.

The man slashed his sword and he quickly blocked the blow. He needed to keep this one alive. Someone ordered the raid on his lands and Dougal would know who put his people's lives

in jeopardy. He ducked the next strike and landed a solid punch, knocking the man back. The raider raised his weapon and charged, taking them to the ground.

Dougal felt the sharp burn of steel bite into his arm as they went down.

"Ye should have... died," the man rasped as his eyes glazed. Blood stained the edges of his mouth. A moment later, he slumped.

Dougal pushed him aside and drew his sword from the man's gut. When they'd collided, the raider landed on Dougal's raised blade. Damnation, the man was dead. He kicked the raider's sword away and turned to take in the battle.

Three of his men were still standing among bodies of the raiders, while William, his man at arms, tended to their wounded. Peter, the youngest of them, lay unmoving in the middle of the lane. Dougal's heart clenched at the sight. The lad couldn't be dead. He was like a brother.

Graeme, the captain of his guard, knelt next to the lad. Graeme Grey was a few years older than Dougal, and glints of silver peeked through the thick brown hair at his temples and in his beard. His skin was well tanned, and thick muscles roped his shoulders, arms, and chest. Lines creased the corners of his eyes and forehead from laughter and his deep concern for the people of Yester. It was those last two traits that meant the most to Dougal. Graeme was the only man to make him laugh and the man's love of Yester matched his own.

Dougal headed toward them. "Peter?"

"Lad just got the sense knocked out of him. Might help if ye ask me," Graeme said.

He felt a flood of relief. "It might at that." Peter was young. Full of the boisterous energy and the immortality of youth, mixed with the swagger of a newly knighted male. An endearing and annoying trait.

"Check the rest, Graeme. See if any live. We have to ken who's behind this."

Graeme motioned to a knight to start the search, then ordered another to round up villagers to help put out the flames.

Dougal wiped the sweat from his brow and took in the carnage. At least half a dozen villagers lay among the dead, two of them women. Children cried and clung to their mothers, and several of the elderly wept at the loss of everything they owned. The village of Saltoun was near gone. "Whoever did this is a dead man," he swore.

Graeme nodded.

A little boy of no more than four summers ran past, tears streaming down his sooty cheeks. A young woman chased after him and caught the boy not two steps away. Her gaze collided with Dougal's, and her eyes widened. She yanked the child into her arms and hurried off.

His heart sank at her reaction. It was the same everywhere, no matter that they were his people. Every one of them feared him. Even many of the people who served in his castle. He muttered a curse for his father, then turned his back to Graeme.

"I'll take Peter back to the castle."

"Laird…"

"I'm a hindrance here. It will take many to put out the fire and find supplies. More will help if they doona also fear me."

Graeme swore. "Get yerself tended as well. Ye're bleeding." He looked pointedly at Dougal's arm.

He glanced down to see blood soaking through his gambeson and leather armor. Dougal frowned, only vaguely remembering the bite of the blade in the heat of the fight. "I'll wrap it in a moment."

"If ye doona, I'll bring out yer chain mail when I return to the castle."

Dougal narrowed his eyes at Graeme. "Are ye telling yer laird what to wear now?"

His friend laughed. "It is my duty to protect ye and yer line. Another attack like this and yer line might die out with ye."

Dougal sighed. He was well aware of that. Anticipated it, even. Superstition ran deep in people. Fear of the unknown clouded their minds and hearts. Add in the memories of his father and rumors of the activities Dougal enacted in his hall, and he had no hope of finding a wife. Most women ran in fear from him, like the lass chasing the child a moment ago. Those that didn't only wanted a taste of the darkness surrounding Dougal. Fascination and the desire to brag about time spent in his bed drove them, naught more. None truly saw him for the man he was. None saw Dougal, fourth Laird of Yester, who worked tirelessly to protect and care for his people.

"Ye need to take a wife," Graeme continued. "Sire an heir or three. Fill that drafty castle with love and the laughter of children."

Dougal tried to picture such a scene. A bonny wife at his side and merry children. Even his imagination couldn't supply the hope. "That would take a Christmas miracle."

His captain clapped him on his good shoulder, a smile breaking wide across his face. "God willing."

Dougal gripped the back of his neck. "Have William make the litter while I ready my horse."

"Aye. Doona worry. Yer people will be safe."

But too many wouldn't be in their own homes. The fire had devastated the cottages. With winter upon them, there wouldn't be extra food here to spare. He had to send the people elsewhere, for their own well-being.

Twenty minutes later, William finished tying the hastily made litter to Dougal's mount. "I used the best wood I could find among the damage, Laird. It should hold the lad until ye reach Yester," he said, swiping a lock of dark blond hair from his eyes. Several strands had fallen out of the tie that held his hair back. William was as steadfast as any man he'd known. Taller than most and strong enough to knock a man flat with a single punch, he sent many a man running in a fight. "He has a good heart, despite being a pain in my arse. I doona want to lose him," William said.

"I'll have him tended to," Dougal said.

They walked the horse over to where Peter lay and lifted the lad onto the canvas stretched across the wood frame, then tied him to it with scraps of linen so that he wouldn't slip off while they rode the few hours back to Yester.

Dougal wrapped a scrap of linen around his wounded arm, then mounted his palfrey. "These people will need food and shelter afore it snows tonight. Send them to Wester." It was the closest village. "Make sure they are housed and fed. We will send additional supplies from the castle tomorrow to supplement what they'll need for the winter."

"Doona worry, Laird. Just see to yerself and our young friend Peter," Graeme said.

He nodded and spurred his horse into an easy trot. People ducked their heads or turned away as he passed. One made the sign of the cross. Dougal ground his teeth. Their reactions never changed. It didn't matter that he fought to save their lives and their village. That he provided extra food and shelter for them. They still feared him and always would. He shouldn't be disappointed. Hardening his heart, he started home.

Graeme's words haunted him. He was almost certainly the last Laird of Yester. He hadn't lied about a Christmas miracle. No woman would ever want him. Not with his father's legacy shadowing his every move and rumors that Dougal followed his da's path. He squashed the hope and longing for a family down to the deepest parts of his heart and tried hard not to think about them.

He was still fighting his thoughts an hour later when a loud whistle sang out. White-hot pain flared in his left shoulder. The force knocked him back, and he almost lost his seat. Dougal gripped his mount with his knees and reached for his shoulder in a haze of pain. His fingers met a wooden shaft. Another whistle sounded. He yanked the reins, turning his horse aside, and the second arrow pierced his right thigh. Blood flowed through Dougal's fingers in a river of red, and his eyesight dimmed as blackness threatened to take hold. He spurred his horse faster, one weak hand clinging to the reins. He had to make it back to Yester castle. Their lives depended upon it.

Dougal sagged forward and held tight to his mount as another arrow whistled through the air.