

CHAPTER ONE

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‘Blood, bones and belly,’ William D’Amory muttered softly.

The knife had slipped and sunk into his thumb, carving a jagged line across the dirty skin. A fat bead of blood swelled out of the cut. He wiped it on his tunic, smearing the faded wool, and watched in fascination as another shiny red ball bloomed in its place. He put the cut to his mouth and sucked to stop the bleeding, then spat into the lane below.

William was sitting in a tree, waiting to meet his brother Joss on his way home. The tree gave a good vantage point over the lane. Late summer sunlight filtered through the leaves and sent shadows stretching across the empty fields. He could hear the far-off bells of the Abbey. He spat into the lane again, practising his aim, then went back to whittling at the piece of wood he had picked up. He was carving it into the figure of a little knight. He had already finished the helmet, the folds of the clothes, and a sword, pointed downwards, with the knight’s hands resting on its pommel. Now, using the very tip of the knife, he etched deep, well-marked eyes, so that the tiny warrior stared out into the distance, searching the skies for adventure.

William slid the knife into his belt, and leant back against the trunk of the tree. Hunger was coiling in his stomach, his shoes were pinching his feet, and he had three new flea-bites on his left arm, but with his eyes closed, listening to the breeze in the leaves around him, he was no longer the fourteen-year-old youngest son of a small manor, struggling through the stalemate of an old

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war. Instead he was a knight himself, riding in his own warrior band, covering the miles towards a wild frontier, the wind singing in the hills. This was his favourite dream, as familiar as his own shabby cloak, and he could burrow into it whenever he wanted. He had dreamt it for three years, ever since the messenger had come to the manor to tell the family about the breaking of the King's army, and their father Edward D'Amory's death.

William scratched his chin, and wiped his nose on the sleeve of his tunic.

Then there was a noise in the lane below. It was William's brother, Joss, fast asleep in the saddle with his mouth open, swaying slightly backwards and forwards as the horse moved. Joss was older than William, and bigger, and much stronger, and these chances didn't come up often. William gathered himself together, tucked up his feet, and toppled neatly out of the tree on top of his brother.

Joss was the first to pick himself up.

'God's blood, Will, you stupid fool!' he yelled. 'Why did you do that?'

William was still rolling in the lane, moaning in pain and laughing.

'Edith wanted me to hurry you home for supper,' he gasped, struggling to sit up, and peering at his knee where there was a new hole in his hose.

After swearing at William some more, and knocking him over a few times when he tried to get up, Joss shook himself, circled his shoulders round, pulled some mud out of his hair and cheerfully set off after Plum, the horse.

'It's a long time till supper. Why does Edith want us home?' he called over his shoulder.

'There's a guest coming. A messenger arrived a while ago and they've all been flapping about since then.' William got to his feet and limped after Joss.

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'I wonder who that is, then,' said Joss as William caught him up.

'I don't know, I wasn't paying attention. But Aethelwyn made us all wash our faces – even Sym.'

'God's body, Sym's washed his face?'

With the horse's reins looped around Joss's wrist they meandered on up the lane, through the tunnel of boughs over their heads, climbing steadily uphill while the sun sank and the shadows lengthened around them. Soon they were looking down on Evescombe, the manor where they lived, with the dark woods behind it, and the sheen of the sea beyond. The manor house was long and low, made of plain stone, with the courtyard in front, framed by the manor buildings. Next to the house they could see their sister Edith's kitchen garden, and the little orchard of fruit trees behind. At the open side of the courtyard stood the ancient stone cross that was their church.

Joss was telling William about the horses on his friend Brian de Pomeroy's estate.

'I wish I could have a proper horse,' he said. 'I'm a much better rider than Brian. He rides like a – like a big bucketful of cess.'

William nodded sympathetically, sucking on a piece of grass he had pulled up from the hedgerow.

'I'll buy you a proper horse. When I'm a knight.'

'When you're a knight? You'll buy me a proper horse when you're a knight?'

'Yes.'

'Go on, then. Tell me. How are you going to become a knight?' Joss asked, and pushed William into the hedge.

In fact William had many versions of how he was going to become a knight. There was one where he won all the prizes in a grand tournament; one where he saved a city from a terrible siege; and one where he fought a huge green slobbering monster and saved an entire town from being sucked into the sea. All of

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these involved William wearing some formidable armour which concealed his identity, and they all included the King being overcome with admiration and giving him a wealthy manor and a chest full of gold. He might be digging horse manure into the carrot patch, or breaking up clods of earth in the big North Field, or scooping rotten leaves out of the fishpond, but in his mind he was Sir William D'Amory, the King's greatest knight, riding through fields of colour and glory.

Joss was watching him kindly as he scrambled out of the hedge.

'You do know that there's no money, William, don't you? The manor's not making anything, and hasn't done since our father died.'

William's fingers found the shape of the little carved figure he had made, still tucked safely into a fold of his tunic. He weighed it in his hand. Down in the dusty path, seeing his brother's tired face, with a meagre meal to look forward to and another day of chores always ahead, he knew that Joss was right. To be a knight you had to have money. There were the horses, for a start: a warhorse, a riding horse, and a pack horse, at the very least. And no knights wore their elder brother's faded old tunics with the sleeves rolled up, or had holes in the knees of their hose. He felt a cold wind tugging at his dream.

'Maybe we could sell something to buy a horse?' he suggested feebly.

'Sell something? Something from the manor? God's body, William, you'd be lucky to get a chicken with the pox with all the money you'd make.'

Now William could smell the smoke from the manor's hearths, and hear the shouts and calls as orders were made and carried out to prepare the manor for the night. He could see Wilf and Sym, the two farmhands, leading the heavy farm horses towards the stables, and his brother Richard, stooped anxiously

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over the ploughshare. Richard was a knight, but their father's death had tied him to the duties of looking after Evescombe. Instead of riding out to answer the call of his King, he paid scutage, the fee which released him from the military obligations of his knighthood. Richard never dreamed of distant horizons. Sometimes, thought William, as he watched his brother carefully stroking the plough's blade, it seemed as though Richard would be happy to stay at Evescombe for ever.

Aethelwyn, their mother's old Saxon nurse, was crossing the courtyard, meeting their sister Edith in the middle. They heard Edith sing out a greeting as she passed, swinging an empty bucket in her hand. It was all familiar and all ordinary.

But as they reached the gate into the courtyard they saw their mother, Lady Eleanor, standing at the foot of the hall steps, talking to a stranger. He was tall and broad-shouldered, though he leant on a stick, and his hair was grey. He wore a long brown cloak. It was tattered, patched and stained, but they could still make out the mark sewn on to it, running across his back and from his shoulders to the ground: the remains of a great red cross, the sign of the Crusader. Joss and William looked at each other, then stared again at the stranger.

'Why have we got a Crusader in our courtyard?' William asked sideways.

'I don't know – I didn't think we knew any Crusaders,' said Joss slowly. 'The only one – no, it can't be. He couldn't still be alive. Could he?'

'Who? Who are you talking about?'

'It must be him. God's precious breath. That's Sir Godfrey.'

William blinked, and looked again. Sir Godfrey D'Amory was a figure from their childhood stories. The youngest son of the D'Amory who had come over with the Conqueror, Godfrey D'Amory had left the murky green country of the Saxon lands to return to Normandy as a squire, years ago, back before William's

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father was even born. From there he had disappeared into the Holy Land, in the dusty train of the Crusaders. He had become one of the D'Amorys' fireside heroes, a character conjured up from the leaping flames; no-one quite knew whether to believe in him or not.

'Sir Godfrey D'Amory? Our father's uncle?'

'Who else?'

'Isn't he supposed to be dead?'

'Yes.'

'He doesn't look very dead to me.'

'He doesn't, does he? God's bones. Sir Godfrey D'Amory.'

A light wind chased through the courtyard, and the old knight, not a picture in the flames any more but real, turned and looked back, straight at William.

CHAPTER TWO

A door opened and shut, and a draught, cold on the back of William's neck, woke him up.

Still dazed by sleep, blinking into the blackness of the hall's rafters, he lay for a moment, and listened to the noises of the sleeping household around him. Slowly he remembered the evening before, and Sir Godfrey, sitting at the table, spearing up meat with a large knife and talking grimly to Richard about the civil war. Later on, the old knight, leaning on his knees, had told stories of his days in the Holy Land, when the Crusades had taken him to Outremer, the land beyond the sea, until the black shadows swam with gold and white as the mead jug went from hand to hand.

William grinned to himself, and turned onto his side.

The place beside him was empty. Joss's pallet bed, where he slept on the floor next to William, was in its place, and William remembered Joss falling onto it once the celebrations had come to an end, but his brother was not there.

By now William was kneeling up. He remembered what Sir Godfrey and Richard had spoken of: the King's loss of the southwest; bands of lawless men roaming the hills, stealing and raiding, burning . . . had Joss heard something to make him want to check the courtyard? The stables, the storehouses, the cowbyre . . . William stared into the blackness of the hall. If something happened to the stores or the animals, what would be left to guard against the long slow hungry months of the winter ahead?

There was a sound. A solid thud, somewhere outside the stone walls.

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William fumbled at the bottom of his pallet bed for his clothes. He wriggled into his hose, and pulled his tunic over his head. He pushed his feet into the cracked leather of his shoes and stood up, knotting a cord loosely around his waist. Then he let himself down from the dais and slipped through the dark hall.

Outside there was a thin light from the moon, and the air was cold and clean. William stood on the stone steps and waited, listening to the silence.

Then something flickered at the corner of his eye, over to the far side of the courtyard where the old storeroom was. He leapt down the steps and ran lightly across the trodden earth of the courtyard floor.

The storeroom was lit by the moonlight from the open doorway. William gazed round. In the darkness the shapes seemed unfamiliar, and the shadows cast by the moon were strange. One silhouette, stretching up the empty wall, looked like a cross.

William took a quick glance back into the courtyard. Nothing moved. He stepped further into the storeroom, and now he could see it, gleaming dully: a great sword, held upright where it had been thrust into a pile of panniers and rolled fabric, so that the hilt stuck up, throwing the cross-like shadow onto the wall. Of course, William realised, this must be where Sir Godfrey was storing his baggage. This was his sword. William's fingers slipped easily around the leather-wrapped hilt and he pulled.

Stretching his arm out in front of him, William could feel the weight of the sword's pommel counter-balancing the heavy blade. He heard Sir Godfrey's words from the night before, describing his adventures in the Holy Land. The storeroom around William seemed to fade, and instead he saw the towering walls of a city backed by mountains, bleached white in the Syrian sun; the great princes of Damascus and Alexandria wheeling their horses, and a line of knights drawn up for battle, their bright-coloured surcottes and banners rippling and snapping in a scorching wind.

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A sharp clatter brought William back to the storeroom. His foot had knocked one of the balanced panniers, already dislodged by the sword, so that it fell sideways and spilt its contents over the floor. William laid the sword down, and hurriedly began to stuff the things back, cursing under his breath. He found a roll of parchments, a folded piece of cloth, and a leather wallet, cracked with age and handling, one corner peeling back to reveal some documents. He pushed these back into the pannier. Then as he swept the floor with outstretched hands to check that he had everything, his fingers found a box.

It was a handspan wide, warm and almost silky to the touch, and it gleamed white in the moonlight. There were intricate drawings carved into the sides and top, with strange, delicate symbols dancing around the borders. It looked foreign, and old – a box for holding secrets and promises. William turned it over in his hands, and felt something shifting inside, sliding from one end to the other. But when he tried to open the lid, it was locked.

A tiny sound made William look up; a sound like a breath, drawn in quickly. He looked over his shoulder. Something seemed to have shifted in the shadows behind him. He crouched, staring, straining to see further into the inky depths of the storehouse. Had the door moved slightly in the stillness? He listened, his heart slamming in his chest, but there was nothing more.

He turned back to lay the box carefully on top of the leather wallet.

Then a new shadow fell across him and the night exploded as something heavy struck the side of his head.

William hit the floor hard. A dark form was looming over him: a hooded figure, its shape disguised by the heavy folds of a cloak. The wooden staff that had hit him was swinging up again.

William scrambled away, his hands reaching blindly for the sword. As his fingers closed around the pommel he found his

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feet and was crouching ready for the next blow. He leapt away and brought the sword spinning round in a shining arc, but the staff was already there, fending off the blade. He swept the sword clumsily back and lifted it in an attempt to reach the man's undefended left side. Again the wooden staff met the sword halfway. William sidestepped and brought the sword back in time to meet another blow, thrusting the blade out in front of him in a blind parry. The staff fell harmlessly away, but it came curving back, again, and again after that, relentless, and though it was not sharp, the power behind each strike was forcing William back towards the furthest wall of the storeroom.

William could hear nothing but his own breath, dry and hoarse. He knew the man was too powerful for him. He was caught in the corner of the room, with no escape.

Then the staff rose high and swept down on his right elbow. Pain sang up his arm to his shoulder, and the sword fell from his helpless fingers, clattering to the floor. His assailant closed in, a gloved fist knocked him easily to the floor, and the man knelt over him with one knee pressing down on his shoulder.

'Who are you and what are you looking for?'

The voice was harsh and grating, unmistakable, the voice of the fireside the night before.

'Sir Godfrey?' William choked.

There was a blank silence, then Sir Godfrey asked, 'Who's that?' The weight lifted from William's shoulder, and William wriggled up, snatching his breaths, his eyes watering from the pain and his right arm cradled across his body. It was still numb.

'It's me, Sir Godfrey, William D'Amory.'

'William? Eleanor's boy? God's dignity, are you all right?' An arm came around William's shoulders to help prop him up.

'I am, I'm all right, although this arm . . .'

'Yes, that'll hurt for some time, I'm afraid. William. Well. God's breath. William.' Sir Godfrey sat down, next to William,

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with his back against the wall.

They sat in silence, both breathing hard. William waited. He had, after all, been caught rifling through Sir Godfrey's possessions. His great-uncle might think that being beaten with a big stick was the only proper punishment. Then Sir Godfrey spoke.

'I'd like to know two things, William.'

William looked up.

'Who taught you to swordfight? And why were you looking through my bags?'

William drew breath. 'Because of my brother Joss, sir. He's disappeared somewhere. He's not in his bed. I came out to see if I could find what's happened to him.'

Sir Godfrey said nothing.

'I heard a sound in the courtyard. I thought he might have . . . might be doing something that I could . . . You and Richard were saying, at dinner, about the war . . .' William floundered. He cursed himself, wiped his nose on his sleeve, and tried again. 'And then I thought I saw something over in the storerooms, so I came to look, and I saw your sword, the one you had at Antioch . . .'

'And what else did you find? In my bags?' he asked.

'I didn't look inside,' said William. 'A few things fell out of one. A leather wallet, a roll of parchment, an old piece of material, and a box, that was all. I put them back.'

'An ivory box? Locked?'

'Yes, I suppose it was ivory.'

Sir Godfrey continued to stare at him. One of his hands played at his collar, and William saw that he was pulling something to and fro on a thin leather cord as he thought. In the thin moonlight all the furrows and lines of his face were outlined in black, and his eyes were sunken pits beneath the white brows.

Then Sir Godfrey's face relaxed into a smile. He reached out and took up his sword, which was still lying on the floorboards

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where William had dropped it.

'I apologise, William. I am not used to living in a family home, and I came out to see that all was secure. The noise you heard must have been me. Maybe I should have retired to some rocky crag and spent the rest of my time on earth just . . . keeping watch.' He sighed, then went on: 'And my first question? Who taught you to fight like that?'

William shrugged. 'My father started to teach me, sir, but since he died no-one here has had time to train me. I would love to learn properly. Sometimes I practise with Richard and Joss, but that's only fooling around. Sir Hugo did promise that I could be a squire at the Pomeroy manor like Richard and Joss were. Then I could train with Brian's brothers. But my father died before I was old enough to start, and Sir Hugo must have forgotten about me. Anyway, there isn't money to equip us all to be knights.'

'I see,' Sir Godfrey said, studying his blade in the faint grey light. 'You know, being a knight . . . it's not all heroism. There are duties involved, and burdens, as well. Still, if that's what you're hoping to be, a knight's training is the first step. You don't know whether there'll be money or not in five years' time, but if you haven't had any training you'll be helpless either way.'

William grunted. Sir Godfrey started to polish his sword on a fold of his cotte.

'You can ride a horse, of course?'

'Yes – not as well as Joss, but I can ride.'

'Good. Otherwise, at your age, I don't think there's much we could do. If a boy can't ride by the age of twelve, he is only fit to be a priest. But as it is . . . ' Sir Godfrey sighed again, stood up, and lifted the sword closer to his face to inspect it with narrowed eyes, tilting it this way and that so that the moonlight shone on it. 'Poor Eleanor! Are none of her sons going to be monks?'

William scrambled to his feet. 'Are you going to train me, sir?' he asked, as Sir Godfrey walked back to his pile of baggage

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and started to wrap the sword up again.

'From what I saw, you may not need much training,' said Sir Godfrey, crouching down and thoughtfully turning some of the bundles over. 'But I am supposed to know something about it, so I might be able to give you some advice.' Then he looked up. 'You don't want to become a monk, do you?'

William grinned. 'Not even Mother thinks I could be a monk, sir. Maybe we could borrow some of the practice-weapons they have at the Pomeroy manor?'

'That's a good idea. I need to go to meet Sir Hugo anyway, to discuss a plan I have to build a church here at Evescombe – I'll ask him then. And we can surely rig up a quintain somewhere around here.' Sir Godfrey waved vaguely around him.

'They used to use the old paddock, behind the stables.'

'Excellent. And now, I need to check my baggage. You go back to bed. Get some sleep. Meet me in the paddock, tomorrow, early in the afternoon.'

'Yes, sir – thank you, sir.'

Sir Godfrey was already concentrating on the wrapped bundles, and William wasn't sure if he even heard.

* * *

William climbed back up the steps to the hall, rubbing his bruised arm and grinning. 'Sir William D'Amory? Didn't you know? He was taught by Godfrey D'Amory, the great Crusader!' He could hear the admiring whispers humming in his ears as he crossed the tournament field, coloured banners dancing over his head, noble men and women in gowns as bright as butterflies, falling back in wonder as he passed.

Back in the hall Joss was lying stretched out on his back, snoring. William gave him a kick.

'Where were you?' he hissed, wrenching off his shoes and

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pulling his tunic over his head.

Joss grunted and half opened one eye. He said, 'I had to use the privy,' then he heaved himself over onto one side and the snores started again.

But William stayed awake for a long time, gazing on his visions of glory as they paraded through the silvery light of the hall.