

CONQUERED

A muscular man is the central figure, wearing a silver, spiked helmet that covers his face, leaving only his eyes and mouth visible. He is shirtless, showing a well-defined physique. A sword is resting on his right shoulder. The background is dark and textured, possibly a wall or a cave.

THE INVADERS SERIES

PARKER DANIELS

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty One](#)

[Chapter Twenty Two](#)

Chapter Twenty Three

Chapter Twenty Four

Chapter Twenty Five

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To my mother. The person who encouraged me to enjoy reading as much as she did. You were my biggest fan and would have been the first in line to buy this book. I love you and miss you every day.

Chapter One
England, 1067

Their arrival was inevitable. We'd held out as long as we could, but now the Normans were at our front gates.

We neither had the manpower nor the leadership to push back their hordes. King Harold had lost. William had won. We must accept that defeat. To not do so would mean bloodshed. Something my people had seen enough of already.

"They're outside our very gates, Carrion!" I angrily informed my fiancé, who was busy enjoying his morning tea and toast in the great hall.

The pale-faced lord waved his hand dismissively through the air. "We knew this would happen. They are testing us, my love. They can't get through our defenses. They are impenetrable."

My love. They can't get through our defenses. Impenetrable. All lies! We both knew there was no love shared between us. And those men would get through our gates. History had taught us that nothing was impenetrable. It was only a matter of time before the Normans breached the perimeter and were standing inside the very walls of this keep.

"We need a plan, Carrion. We can't ignore them forever. They won't just go away."

"Lord Farnsly is sending reinforcements as we speak. I sent the missive a month back. He has pledged two hundred men. We cannot lose."

We cannot win, I thought darkly. They would starve us out or poison our wells next. But I wasn't about to let either happen to the good people of Bailliot.

"I understand Lord Farnsly means to assist us, but we need to discuss what happens *if* the man is held up." Or, more likely, never shows.

Farnsly was a notorious coward who considered himself above king and country every time he was tested. I wasn't

about to place my faith in his incompetent hands. Not when the stakes were so high.

“You’re far too pretty to worry about this Elsbet,” Carrion smiled, exposing a field of crooked teeth. “This is men’s business. Go about yours before you become overwrought.”

I leaned forward, fingers splayed wide upon the scarred trestle table. “My people *are* my business. I will neither ignore them, nor the men pounding at our doors!”

Carrion smiled ferally. “You must be used to that by now, Elsbet. Men pounding at your door to get in. Do as you always do and dismiss them. That seems to have worked for you in the past.”

Not impressed with his metaphor, I shook my head. “You are a fool! I don’t know why my father ever pledged me to you.”

A malevolent shadow fell over the lord’s pockmarked face. “The man is dead, so his motives don’t concern me. But lucky for you, his marriage contract does. I think tis time we settle this matter once and for all.”

“Meaning?” I demanded, my dark hair spilling over my shoulders in a thick mass of curls that landed just below my waist.

“Meaning,” he returned, his milky blue eyes cutting into my light brown ones, “it’s high time we wed. I wish to seal this deal that was long ago made between our two families. Tis especially important with the arrival of the barbarian Saxon troops on our land. I intend to protect you with my name, Elsbet. Otherwise, you could helplessly fall prey to any of those who try to usurp me. We wed tomorrow.”

Rearing back as though burned, my full lips thinned into a sneer of disgust. “Marry me? That ceremony is not set to take place until next summer, milord. And, as you are well aware, I’m challenging the contract. How many times must I tell you, milord, I will not marry you!”

Carrion’s mouth became equally harsh in measure. “You are a woman, Elsbet. Your opinion doesn’t matter. How

many times must *I tell you* that?" His smug grin spread across his face like a disgusting plague. "The priest shall wed us at noon and I shall have torn your maidenhead by the proceeding hour. Tis decided and nothing you say can change my mind. I am lord here. You are not but my consort. Learn to live with that, milady."

Bourbon-toned eyes met milky blue ones. "Do not push me, Carrion. You're not equipped to fight a double-fronted war. That I promise you!"

Carrion arose. He stood only a handful of inches above my diminutive five-foot frame, but it was enough to make his point. "Women don't fight, Elsbet. They submit to the strongest conqueror. Just know that I am that man."

"We shall see about that, milord," I stated, ominously. We shall see about that.

Chapter Two

The priest stood nervously, mopping at the sweat coursing down his forehead. "Is it hot in here?" he asked, looking about him for confirmation on the subject. "I feel as though it is hot."

It was warm. Unseasonably so. But that was not what was bothering the man. It was the unceasing arrows and the eerie sounds of a battering ram abutting our defenses that were making him feel thusly.

Dressed in my finest lilac silk gown, I looked at the older man with a mix of pity and frustration. He was blind in one eye and could barely walk. Of course a siege would upset him. An unwavering allegiance to God or not, this was no game we were playing at. Everyone could feel the enemy breathing down our necks. Soon it would be more than our defenses we had to worry about. It may be our lives we laid forfeit in this endless battle of empires we were unlucky enough to be caught up in.

"Proceed," Carrion spat from between clenched teeth.

"I seemed to have forgotten my bible," the priest babbled, searching about as though it would somehow materialize out of thin air.

"Recite the vows from memory then," Carrion pressed, his clammy hand crushing mine. "The abbreviated version will do."

The abbreviated version, indeed! The man was a fool. Instead of trying to force me into his bed, he should have been trying to force the enemy from our lands. Figure out his next defensive move. But that would have been the smart thing to do. And nobody had ever accused my fiancé of being smart.

"I..., do you. I mean, have you...,"

"Oh, for pity's sake," Carrion swore as I tore my hand from his. "How many marriages have you performed, old man? Surely you can remember enough of the words to finish the job!"

It didn't matter. I would not submit or speak a single word in response to seal the union. Carrion was right about one thing. Men were conquerors. But women, we were life-long warriors. And I had only just begun to fight. Sometimes the most brutal of battles were waged with words. Or, in this case, silence.

From the windows of the church, I could see tiny orange geysers springing up in the courtyard. The Normans were volleying flaming arrows over our gates in hopes of burning our dwindling spring rations. They must have landed on something flammable like a hayloft or wooden structure because they'd caught and were now being snuffed out by the terrified servants. Who knew what manner of depravities would be next?

"Yes, yes, of course," the clergyman assented, his head bobbing up and down like a drowning duck. Droplets of sweat dotted his limp collar. "Do you, Elsbet, take this man..."

The priest's troubled voice droned on, but I couldn't hear him. My thoughts were too loud. My eyes swept the church. Those few souls present held the same fearful expressions as rats caught in a trap awaiting what came next.

My maid, Myriam, lovingly tucked a long, dark strand of hair behind my ear. "You need to say yes, my dear," she coached in her soft, motherly voice.

No, I didn't. Like the siege outside our gates, I needed to wait this assault out until I could strategize my next steps. Agreeing to this farce didn't accomplish anything other than tying a noose around my neck. And I had no intention of willingly signing up for that.

Carrion dug his fingers into my scalp and tugged my hair hard. My head snapped back and his beaky nose crushed against mine. "Say. Yes. Elsbet!" Spittle from his mouth flicked onto my lips and I turned my head in disgust.

"Never!" I stubbornly rasped.

Carrion dragged me over to the front pews of the church. Stopping at the one my family had worshipped from, he furiously bent me over the wooden backrest.

“Say yes or you’ll regret it!” He threatened.

“Go to hell!” I returned, the wind knocked clean out of my chest as he crushed his weight down upon me. The priest gasped with shock at my blasphemy.

“Fine,” Carrion relented. “If you don’t agree, I shall be forced *not* to take you as my wife.”

Relief shot through my veins until he followed up with his next words.

“I won’t take you as my wife, Elsbet. I’ll take you as my whore! I don’t need your agreement for that.”

“Milord,” the priest weakly intervened, “perhaps the lady just needs a moment. It’s not uncommon for brides to become overwhelmed on their wedding day. Mayhap,” but he shut his mouth when Carrion sent him a murderous glare.

Forcing the threat of his erection against my backside, my former fiancé demanded, “What shall it be, milady? Do you wish to be my wife, and do this in the privacy of our bedchamber? Or, do you wish to be my whore, and do it right here in front of my men? Tis your choice. I care not what you decide. I get what I want either way.”

My eyes darted to the group of Carrion’s men standing by the chapel door. One of them licked his lips in anticipation of such a show. Another laughed and whispered something into a third’s ear. He proceeded to rub his hand between his legs, shifting the bulge there to one side.

Feeling as though I was going to be sick, I struggled against Carrion’s grip. But my efforts were in vain. Though a petite man, the lord was far stronger than he appeared.

He ground his stiff cock against me and I shrieked. I’d been so worried about the invaders outside the keep, that I’d never given a moment’s thought about those within it.

Myriam was at the man's side now, begging for him to stop this insanity. "Please, milord! Don't hurt her! She's to be your wife. You don't want to do this."

Carrion's hand snaked out and cruelly lashed the crying woman in the face. "Silence!" he barked, desperately trying to untie the band that kept his breeches up. "If the little bitch doesn't want this to happen, she knows what she must do."

Myriam whimpered helplessly from the floor. The sound near broke my heart. But it did not break my will. I could not be swayed. I'd made my choice. I'd prefer a few minutes of pain over a lifetime's worth as Carrion's wife.

Grunting with anticipation, the lord managed to free the knot that kept him from his goal. From the corner of my eye, I could see his soldiers' feet inch closer. Their breathing was audible now. Their excitement, palpable. They wanted front-row seats to this sinful act and they were not shy about attaining them.

Carrion leaned down, whispering into my ear, "Perhaps I'll let them each have a turn when I'm done, Elsbet. Show you that you're no longer the lady of the keep. That your place is beneath me, and not above." He laughed, a high-pitched kind of sound. "I bet you won't be so dismissive of me then. I bet you'll beg for my cock in that arrogant cunt of yours after that!"

Hand fumbling beneath my skirt, Carrion yanked the fabric over my back. Cool air rushed up to greet my naked flesh. Thin fingers reached between my legs and roughly probed my center.

Panic-stricken, I began to fight anew. Unfortunately, my struggles, like wounded bait on a hook, excited my fiancé and our audience all the more.

Having now freed his member from his chausses, Carrion kicked apart my legs and lined himself up to my entrance. I could hear the priest chanting a desperate Our Father and

Myriam sobbing for mercy. His men, however, were egging him on. Encouraging him to “fuck” the fight of me.

The doors to the chapel opened then and a second group of soldiers entered. The room stilled and all hushed.

“What is the meaning of this?” A man’s deep voice angrily demanded.

Carrion relaxed his hold on me. I scuttled out of his reach and across the floor into Myriam’s open arms. These were my father’s men. And they outnumbered my fiancé’s two to one.

“Tis my wedding day,” Carrion snarked, fumbling to tuck his softening member back inside his breeches. “And you’re not invited, Tanner.”

My father’s most loyal man took in the state of my rumpled gown and tousled hair. “Twould seem to me you have forgotten the order of things, milord. The wedding comes before the wedding night.”

“Watch yourself,” Carrion warned. “This keep will be mine by the end of the day. And I have no need for men who aren’t loyal.”

Tanner walked over to me and reached out his warm hand. Without hesitation, I placed my smaller one into it. Lifting me as though I weighed no more than the six-year-old child he used to chase around the courtyard, he steadied my wavering legs.

“I’ve bad news,” he addressed the room. “We’ve just received a missive from Lord Farnsworth. The man isn’t coming. He’s just pledged his fidelity and troops to the new king. I’m afraid we’re on our own.”

I felt the walls of the church suddenly fold in on me. “How long until they get in?” I rasped.

“A day. Maybe two.”

“But Bailliot is impenetrable!” Carrion choked out, shock and terror illuminating his pale face.

“Nothing is impenetrable, milord,” Tanner refuted, echoing my thoughts from earlier. “Bailliot will fall. It is only

a matter of when. Not if.”

Chapter Three

Carrion was gone. Claiming he'd needed council, he'd left the church and stolen my family's silver on his way out of the keep. Taking all of his men with him, he'd escaped into the night through a secret tunnel that fed out into the forest. His betrayal had left Bailliot even more vulnerable than it already was, proving him the worm I well knew him to be.

Tanner and I were atop the battlements looking down at the invading army below. Still wearing my wedding finery, I once again asked, "How long?"

The hardened warrior scrubbed a tired hand across his stubbled jaw. "They've breached our outermost battlements. We won't last another night."

I sighed, the weight of this truth washing over me. "What are our options?"

"The way I see it, we have three. We can send a runner to Lord Farnsworth's castle asking if he'd be willing to act as an intermediary between ourselves and the Normans."

I snorted. "We both know that Farnsworth won't come. He doesn't do anything that doesn't directly benefit him." My amber eyes burned from the smoke of the fires and the fatigue of this seemingly endless day.

Tanner didn't comment. "We can place our remaining troops around the bailey. Hold them off for as long as possible and fight to the death when they get in."

"Or," I pressed, knowing the third option was really the only viable one left.

"We can surrender."

Turning to Tanner, I posed, "What if there were a fourth option?"

"I'm listening."

"What if we combined the first and third plans together? Ran for help as we seemingly sued for peace."

Lifting a curious brow, Tanner asked, "Run to whom?"

“Do you remember that nobleman who tried to negotiate the marriage contract with my father a few years back? Count Simon Godfrey.”

He snorted. “The one older than your father who liked young girls?”

I blew out a weary breath. “That’s the one. He has twice as many men as Bailliot and Carrion told me he befriended the Normans early on. Godfrey’s become a trusted man of theirs. His castle is nye but a week’s ride to the west. What if I offered to marry him? Do you think that would incentivize the count to assist us?”

Tanner walked closer to the wall’s edge, staring down at the writhing mass of men. “Tis possible but...,”

Moving beside him, I placed my hand on his shoulder. “We’ve no choice, Tanner. Our people are about to die. I can’t give up before I’ve exhausted every option.”

“And that means marrying the pedophile count? Why fight off Carrion, milady, if you were just going to offer yourself up to someone even worse?”

Blinking back the tears, I swallowed them down my throat where they belonged. “Carrion had nothing to offer me or my people. And now, I have nothing to offer them. As a woman, my title is all that I hold of value in this world. The count has an army and the king’s ear. I will trade whatever I possess to protect those who depend upon me.”

We stood in silence for a while. The wind, blowing plumes of smoke and ash, covered our faces and hid our fears. It was also a sobering reminder of what was to come. Especially if we did not act fast.

Letting my plan play out in his head for a bit, Tanner finally relented. “I’ll send Moore with the missive at dawn.”

“No. You’ll go yourself, and you’ll leave tonight. I don’t trust anyone but you with a task this important.”

“Milady, you will not negotiate alone! I will be by your side. Your father would-,”

“My father is dead,” I interrupted his chivalrous speech, “but my people aren’t. Not yet. Leave now. Take all but five of our men.”

Face mottled with rage, Tanner spluttered, “What? Why would I leave you so vulnerable? That’s insanity!”

Smiling without joy, I said, “That’s a man’s logic. Not a woman’s. Go,” I pressed, pushing him toward the keep. “I have a plan.”

Rolph de Dronis watched the woman with the long, dark hair staring down at him from atop the battlements. From where he was standing, he could see her, but she was oblivious to him. She was beautiful. An ethereal thing. Even from this great distance, he could see that. He could also see her strength and fierce determination. Twas written all over her proud face.

Rolph must admit, he’d been shocked to learn from the villagers twas a woman defending Bailliot. But he hadn’t been disappointed. Far from it. He’d been intrigued. And after catching a glimpse of the tantalizing maiden, he decided he needed to know her better. To be in her presence. To grip that long, silky mane in his fingers as he explored her ripe curves with his hands. Yes, he would have her. Make her his. Conquer her body as he intended to conquer this very keep.

“Rolph!” Uber, his second in command, called out.

Rolph adjusted his throbbing erection, reluctantly tearing his gaze away from the beautiful woman. “What is it, Uber?”

“We’ve had reports from our men on the west end of the village. They’re claiming they’ve spotted Saxon soldiers fleeing into the woods.”

Frowning, Rolph wondered for what reason they were leaving Bailliot. Was it to seek assistance? Or to abandon a lost cause? Twas an important question. And, until they answered it, a dangerous one.

“There must be a secret tunnel in that keep. We need to find it immediately.” If they did, they’d not only stop the

Saxons from escaping, but they'd be able to steal into the holding in the dead of night without any of the castle inhabitants knowing about it.

Such a find could put an end to the battle before it even had a chance to begin. An outcome that was exactly what Rolph was looking for. When this skirmish was all over, this was to be his demesne. King William had promised it to him. If, that was, he managed to bring it low. He had no desire to burn it to the ground or kill his future people. The quicker this siege ended, the better for them all.

Uber spit onto the ground, ridding his mouth of the taste of smoke and ash. "I've sent ten of our best trackers out to scour the woods. See if they can retrieve some of the Saxons who've managed to escape the keep."

"Good. I need to know what their purpose is. The answer will inform my next move."

Glancing back at the battlements, Rolph noted a soldier walking toward "his" woman. Unexpectedly, primitive instincts to protect the lady rose and burned in his chest with an intensity he'd never known before.

Rolph wondered who the man was to the lady. From his inquiries, he'd learned that Elsbet of Bailliot was unwed. But he knew better than to believe that meant she was an innocent.

A growl rose to Rolph's lips at the thought of Elsbet in another man's bed. After all, William had promised him the spoils of this demesne if he conquered it. And, as was the custom, those spoils would include the castle and all those who dwelled within. That meant the lady, by right, was his! Rolph meant to make use of her ample "spoils" as soon as he entered the keep's steel gates.

Uber's voice broke into his thoughts then. "Do you want me to give the order for the archers to volley over another round of flaming arrows? The first seemed to have all been extinguished."

Rolph shook his head. “Not yet. I wish to wait. Observe what her next move will be.”

The flaming arrows had been used to merely scare the castle inhabitants. They weren't meant to burn the place down. Rolph's tactical move had called for sending them in short bursts. The goal was to overwhelm the people living within the keep so that they would surrender out of exhaustion. Not to do them irreparable damage.

As they discussed the issue further, a third man joined their ranks. “Milord, we have tracked down all the villagers who were causing trouble earlier. Efron had me corral them in the shell of a barn in the center of town.”

“Ferret out the leaders of the group, Caine. I have a few questions about their mistress I'd like to pose to those who are most knowledgeable.”

A few hours later, Rolph was interrogating those exact villagers when Uber found him. “You must see this, milord. A missive from Bailliot's mistress has arrived for you.”

Electricity began to pump wildly through Rolph's veins. “Let me see that.”

Uber handed him the sealed missive. Snapping the still-warm wax, Rolph unfurled the letter. To his surprise, the message was in French. His eyes scanned the document and he smiled with delight.

“Lady Elsbet wishes to parlay with us.” The idea of meeting with the girl one-on-one caused Rolph's cock to stiffen almost painfully.

“Do you think she desires to surrender?” Uber asked, hopeful that this siege would end peacefully. They had been fighting non-stop for years now. The men were weary and needed a break from so much blood and death.

Rolph grinned. “Tis exactly what I intend to find out.”

Chapter Four

“Open the gates,” I ordered Moore.

The man placed his hand on mine. “Milady, are you sure this is what you want?”

“Want” had very little to do with anything I did these days. “Open it,” I repeated, drawing in a deep breath and stealing my spine.

I’d given Tanner an hour’s head start before I’d sent the missive. It requested the opportunity to parley with the head of the Norman army. I could only imagine what would greet me on the other side of that gate.

The best I could hope for was an opportunity to make a deal with their leader. The worst, a death more terrible than anything I could imagine. And that was saying a lot. I had one hell of an imagination and the Normans one hell of a reputation.

The grinding of heavy chains screeched irritatingly in my ear. Wooden boards creaked and cracked as they descended toward the earth. Reminding myself to breathe, I clutched my mother’s rosary in my palm for comfort and said a silent prayer to the woman I’d never met.

When the dust had cleared, a sea of foreign men stood in front of me. Remembering my duty, I lifted my chin. I was Elsbet of Bailliot. I was not afraid. I couldn’t afford to be.

The chains and wood sounded again as they were hoisted back into place. Silence screamed into the night as I waited for my enemy to make the first move.

It didn’t take long before a blond warrior stepped forward. He was clearly the leader of this army and bigger than any I’d ever seen. But it wasn’t just his size that told me this Norman was in charge. It was his confidence. It naturally radiated off of the man like rays from the sun.

As he approached, I noted the vast width of his shoulders. They were surely twice that of an average man’s. His body, thickly muscled throughout, loudly proclaimed to all his impressive strength.

Swallowing hard, I reminded myself to not look down or away. Like stray dogs that were sizing one another up, the first few moments in this exchange were critical. It was important not to look weak. Even more important, to not look threatening. A threat to this man would be like openly challenging him to a fight. And that was exactly what I was trying to avoid.

I could feel the very ground beneath my feet quake as the giant moved closer. Or was that me? I wasn't sure. All I could see were his cold, blue eyes taking my measure. Starting at the top of my head, they caressed my neck, breasts, and waist like a man greeting his long-lost lover, not his enemy. When his gaze hit my feet, it slowly ran in reverse back to mine.

Flanked by large men on either side of him, the Norman reached out his hand and introduced himself. "Milady Elsbet, I am Rolph de Dronis."

Not able to drag my attention away from the man's piercing blue eyes, I nodded my head and lent him my hand in turn. "Thank you for meeting with me, milord."

A grin teased Rolph's full lips as he bent forward and placed a kiss just below my wrist. "I must admit, I was pleasantly surprised by the invite. I've never had one quite like it." His confident gaze dropped back down to my body and openly appraised me once again. "As far as peace negotiations go, this is by far the most pleasant I've ever had."

My brow hiked at his cheek. "Are you certain that peace is what I come offering?" I couldn't help myself. The man's arrogance begged to be challenged.

His smile widened. "Is it not, milady? Have I misunderstood and you've come to challenge me to a fight instead?"

The notion of my sparring with this giant actually made me smile. "Perhaps another time," I spoke, my golden eyes

now openly appraising him. "You are correct. I do come offering peace-but," I dangled, "at a price."

"Ah, that is the way with beautiful women," Rolph lamented to his companions, "they always 'come' with a price."

I let the men guffaw at their bawdy joke before continuing on. "Let us walk in private, milord, and talk of peace."

Rolph thought the matter over as his men traded wary glances. This time it was my turn to laugh.

"Surely, you're not afraid of a woman, sir?" My dig, however prettily delivered, did not go unnoticed.

Rolph's humor turned feral. "Every smart man knows the most dangerous things in life, milady, come wrapped in attractive packages."

I don't know what had come over me, but I was suddenly in a playful mood. Running my hands over my silk-clad curves to show I wasn't concealing any weapons, I said, "I'm unarmed, milord. You've nothing to fear from me."

Rolph's eyes ignited at the sight of my hands gliding over my ample curves. "Not all weapons are fashioned from steel," he quipped. Changing tact then, he asked, "How do you know that you're safe with me? I could simply agree to this parlay, do a number of depraved things to you," his blue eyes channeled his dark thoughts, "then leverage you to open the gates of Bailliot."

I smiled, having already anticipated such an outcome. "I told my guard he's not allowed to lift the gates until I give the proper signal. Failure to follow my orders in this matter carries the penalty of death."

"Perhaps he loves his mistress and would ignore her decree in order to save her life," Rolph smartly reasoned.

The smile fell from my lips. "You misunderstand, Lord de Dronis. T'was not his death I was referring to. The man has five daughters. And he knows exactly what happens if he should open that gate to your men without my say so. We

have thirty minutes to come to an agreement before my people have been instructed to fight to the death.”

A moment of appreciative silence followed. “I accept your offer. Let us walk and I’ll give you the chance to speak your peace.”

“Rolph, it could be a trap,” the man to his right cautioned.

“It could be,” I agreed. “But it could also be the end of a siege without a single life lost. The decision is in yours, milord.”

Sliding his muscled arm into the crook of mine, Rolph ushered me forward. “Lead the way, milady.”

An intense shiver crept down my back and my legs began to feel unsteady. Chastising myself, I forced my feet to move and carry me through the crowd of soldiers which parted without hesitation.

When we reached the wood line, I craned my neck up at the man who was supposed to be my enemy but was acting more like a potential suitor. “It’s a beautiful night,” I noted, for it truly was. “Tis unfortunate it has to be marred with the ugliness of war.”

Rolph watched me as I spoke. His eyes, twin ice chips, seemed to burrow down into the very marrow of my bones. “But we aren’t talking of war, milady. You lured me here with the promise of peace. Did you nye?”

Touché. “You’re as smart a foe as you are formidable, lord de Dronis.” My childhood had also taught me men liked to be praised. Twas a weapon in my arsenal that cost nothing, but often yielded much. “I’d like to discuss the terms of such a peace, if I may be so bold.”

Rolph’s teeth flashed white in the moon’s light. “Elsbet, you may be as bold as you wish. In fact, I encourage it.”

He was charming. I had to give him that. And handsome. Dangerously so. “Tis my desire to end this feud between us.”

“Tis my desire as well,” Rolph agreed, his tone overly accommodating.

Thinking we would discuss terms under the light of the moon, I was shocked when the Norman propelled me beyond the edge of the wood line and into the forest. Heart quickening, I looked up into his eyes. For the briefest moment, I allowed my fear to show. I’d never been alone with a man before. And this was not just a man. He was my enemy. And I was a woman, totally alone, in his camp.

Quickly, I swallowed my fear and tamped it down deep. It could only hurt me, not help. As fast as the emotion had passed across my face, Rolph had still managed to glimpse it. And I could tell it excited him. His blue eyes dilated and he pressed closer to me, my arm still interlocked with his.

“Are you frightened of me, Bet?” he asked, his voice husky and low.

“Bet?” I returned, questioning the pet name he’d spontaneously given me. I was starting to think I’d overplayed my hand earlier. Given him the wrong idea about my intentions. Playing the whore, though not out of the question given my circumstances, had not been my goal tonight.

“Yes. I like the way the name feels on my tongue. So much less formal. Intimate. Like we’re old friends. Or, perhaps, very good new ones.” His chiseled features betrayed nothing but strength and desire as he spoke.

Growing warm all over, I tugged free of his arm and moved deeper into the wood. Doubling down on confidence I didn’t possess, I peeked at him coquettishly from between two wide tree trunks. “Unfortunately, milord, I’m not in the market for new friends.”

“Are you sure about that, Bet? I’m a very good friend to have.”

The devil himself couldn’t have been more inviting at that moment. Bold. Handsome beyond measure.

Unimaginably strong. Rolph de Dronis was a god among men. And just like a God, he held my fate in his hands.

Carrion was the only man I'd ever had any physical experience with, and he'd never held any appeal to me. His kisses had been dry and his touch abhorrent. But this lord, he just might be my undoing. Invading army or not.

Hugging one of the trees for support, I locked gazes with my adversary. "I'd like to declare my allegiance to your king. Pledge my fealty to him. Become his obedient vassal." Though only a ploy to stall for time, I wouldn't complain if this tactic should work.

But, as I'd suspected, the Norman wasn't impressed with my offer. He tossed his blond head back and barked a laugh into the dark night.

Collecting himself, Rolph's voice was full of humor when he next spoke. "You'd like to declare your allegiance to my king a few hours before I take your castle and all that reside in it? I don't think so, milady."

My cheeks pinkened. He was right, of course, but it stung my pride to be called out so blatantly. "Are you laughing at me, sir?"

Rolph smirked at my feigned upset. "You do understand that when you chose to side with King Harold, his death sealed your fate, and mine, as it were. When I agreed to take Bailliot for William, my price was the castle itself. I'll be its new lord and master the moment I enter her gates. Allegiance from its current occupants or not."

"But I wasn't disloyal to William," I quickly defended. "I seek peace, milord. Twas my fiancé who made enemies with your king and refused to yield to his rule."

Rolph's steps ate up the distance between us. He notched my chin up to meet his hot gaze. "You are spoken for?"

His touch felt like the most pleasant fire I'd ever had the misfortune to be burned by. "Not anymore," I returned cryptically.