

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Elena's Destiny

Lisette Allen

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About the Book

Aimery was back in her life once more and Elena's body was as treacherous with longing as ever. She hated him for what he had done to her that night, arousing her so expertly and so casually. She hated him and couldn't bring herself to tell him to stop. The feelings were too sweet: the desire too strong.'

The year is 1073. The gentle convent-bred Elena awakened to the joys of forbidden passion by the masterful knight Aimery le Sabrenn, has been forcibly separated from her lover by war. She is haunted by the memory of him. Then fate brings her to William the Conqueror's dark stronghold of Rouen, and a reunion with Aimery.

Although Elena is still captivated by his powerful masculinity, she discovers that Aimery is no longer hers. As the King's formidable knights prepare for war, Elena must fight a desperate battle for Aimery against her two rivals: the scheming Isobel and a wanton heiress called Henriette. Dangerous games are played amidst the increasing tension of a merciless siege.

By the bestselling author of Elena's Conquest.

About the Author

Lisette Allen is a Classics graduate and a prolific and popular author of women's erotica and historical sagas.

She is the author of *Elena's Conquest*, *Elena's Destiny*, *Ace of Hearts*, *Nicole's Revenge*, *The Amulet* and *Risky Business*, all available from Black Lace.

By the same author:

Elena's Conquest

Nicole's Revenge

Ace of Hearts

Nadya's Quest

The Amulet

Elena's Destiny

Lisette Allen

**BLACK
LACE**

Chapter One

IN THIS YEAR King William led an English and French host overseas, to conquer the province of Maine. The English laid it completely waste; they destroyed the vineyards, burnt down the towns, and completely devastated the countryside, and brought it all into subjection to William. Thereafter they returned home to England. (The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 1073.)

Henriette was making her way across the crowded banqueting hall with yet another jug of spiced wine when a man called out to her. 'Hey, sweetheart! Bring that wine over here, will you? And stop a while to serve it.'

Henriette giggled and patted her tumbling chestnut curls coyly as the burly soldier who'd just spoken relieved her of the heavy earthenware jug and pulled her on to his knee. Oh, she was enjoying playing at being a serving girl in Duke William's great stronghold of Rouen. Especially as the stern duke himself had been called away unexpectedly, and things were beginning to get rather out of hand.

She gazed happily round the disorderly gathering. All the knights, squires and soldiers who'd been summoned to vow allegiance to Normandy this Eastertide seemed determined on having, one way or another, the time of their lives. The evening's feasting had been going on for hours; down in the kitchens the harassed cooks and scullions were weary with serving up the great silver dishes of venison, and spiced pork, and heron baked in chervil. Now, the food was almost finished. But the wine wasn't, and no-one seemed to have any intention of leaving. Least of all Henriette.

‘You’re a pretty lass,’ murmured the soldier to her, running his hand covetously up and down her plump thigh as he settled her on his lap. ‘New here, are you?’

‘I’ve lived in Rouen all my life,’ grinned Henriette, boldly gazing back into his hot black eyes. That was true, at least. But this handsome, brawny man-at-arms would never guess that she was in fact the daughter of a rich nobleman, whose mansion lay just inside the town’s walls, and who would have had a violent fit of fury if he knew that his cherished only daughter was here dressed as a serving wench, in the very midst of all this boisterous feasting, instead of safely at home in her silk-curtained bed.

Even Henriette was beginning to find the noise somewhat deafening. In the huge, candlelit hall, where the smoke from the fire swirled up to the blackened rafters, there were over a hundred men, their appetite for food almost sated but their desire for wine and entertainment growing by the minute. All the gently bred womenfolk had retired long ago; and now there were only serving girls left, dressed like Henriette in rough serge gowns and linen aprons, running between the crowded trestles, laughing and trying to answer all the urgent cries for more ale, more wine.

Her soldier was talking army talk now with his drunken comrades, but he kept her firmly settled in his lap, and he was still managing to fondle her plump breasts through the coarse fabric of the gown she’d stolen from her maid before sneaking out of the house earlier that evening. As his thumb rasped her stiffening nipple, she felt delightful ripples of pleasure run through her body. She reached for the man’s beaker of wine, and drank down several mouthfuls of the sweet, strong liquid; he grinned and refilled it for her. Henriette sighed happily. She’d never been to a feast such as this one before. How angry Duke William and his bishops would be if they heard of it.

Then Henriette twisted suddenly on the soldier’s knee, because over in one corner, something new seemed to be

happening. A group of rowdy young knights had swept a trestle table clear, knocking bread and wine and meatbones to the floor; an old lurcher hound who had been lying by the fire ambled over and began to devour them. A couple of slatternly maids, whom Henriette had seen working in the kitchens earlier, were laughing as three burly knights pulled a struggling young squire towards them. Henriette was intrigued, and excited. Something wicked was about to happen, she was sure, and she couldn't wait. 'What's going on?' she whispered in her soldier's ear. He grinned, his black eyes assessing her plump, flushed face.

'It's a seasonal sport, sweetheart,' he told her. 'Time for those young squires to prove their manhood. In public.'

'Oh!' Henriette was startled, and fascinated.

'Those wenches will help them along, don't worry. They've done this sort of thing before. See?'

Henriette wriggled on his lap, straining to see better over the sea of faces that filled the hall. The man gave a mock groan.

'Sweetheart, if you carry on moving around on top of me like that, then I swear I'll have to take you on the tabletop myself!'

Henriette blushed, then laughed. Perhaps that wouldn't be such a bad idea. The soldier, who'd told her his name was Armand, was handsome enough, and his thumb was still rasping across her tight little nipples with delightful expertise. She felt warm and aroused. It was a long time - at least a month - since she'd had a good, stalwart man inside her. It was so difficult when her doting parents kept their precious daughter virtually under lock and key, and even more difficult since they'd announced her imminent betrothal to one of Duke William's most renowned knights. Not that she minded *that*. The thought of her betrothal sent shivers of delight up and down her spine.

If she craned her neck she could just see, through the swirling sea of faces, that the young squire had been

encouraged to lay one of the kitchen sluts back across the table and was swiving her vigorously, pushing up her skirts round her waist and gripping her plump buttocks in order to penetrate her more fully. The older men were cheering him on drunkenly, passing loud comments on his technique and offering suggestions. Henriette gazed, rapt. She wished it was her lying there, feeling the young man's vigorous penis thrusting away inside her warm flesh. But then, after all, perhaps she could wait. She felt a fresh tingle of excitement as she remembered that tonight, the man she was going to marry was arriving in Rouen. That was why she had sneaked out here, to the Tower, this evening. Her father had promised her a meeting with her future bridegroom tomorrow, but Henriette was desperate to see him the moment he arrived, because she'd heard whispered rumours that he was the most dangerously attractive knight in all Duke William's domain.

Smiling dreamily to herself at the thought, she became aware that all the soldiers around her were raucously jeering and laying bets as another squire was pulled, bashful and protesting, towards the ceremonial table. 'I'll lay you five deniers this lad won't make it,' commented Henriette's soldier Armand scornfully. 'Look at him. He's shaking with terror.'

'Ten deniers that he will,' drawled another man. 'If he doesn't, I'll go over and show him how to do it myself.'

The others laughed. Someone said, half enviously, 'Aye, you do that, Ralf. That would be a proper treat for the wenches, after having to make do with these puny puppies!'

By now, the older knights who'd organised the entertainment were pulling at the lacing of the reluctant squire's hose; and the two women were teasing him, thrusting their heavy breasts against his face, fumbling with his private parts. Henriette, a little bored with the youth's inadequacy, turned herself on Armand's knee to gaze at the man who had just wagered ten deniers. She knew that his

name was Ralf, and that he was a knight from Normandy, who'd been rewarded with lands in England for his services to William after the conquest. Now he'd returned to Normandy, summoned to this great Easter gathering to swear fresh allegiance to his overlord. He was a good-looking man, she decided, a bit more refined than the others, with thick blond hair and keen, pale blue eyes that were only just starting to look hazed with drink. But his mouth, though beautiful, was somehow cruel. And then, even as she watched him surreptitiously and tried to imagine what he would be like in bed, she saw his pale gaze suddenly travel towards the open door that led to the upper chambers.

'Well,' Ralf said softly. 'So my lady wife condescends to join me at last.'

Henriette turned sharply to where he was looking and gazed in fascination. There, outlined against the doorway, her still figure illuminated by the dancing light of the candles on the walls, was the most beautiful woman Henriette had ever seen.

She was not tall, but she held herself almost regally. Her clinging gown, with its elegant narrow sleeves and flowing skirt that flared out from her slender hips, was of delicate green silk, and a long white kerchief covered most of her hair, though Henriette was able to glimpse that it was the colour of palest gold. Her face was a perfect oval, dominated by wide-set eyes of dark blue; and her gaze rested, expressionless, on Ralf.

Ralf banged on the table and beckoned her with his hand. She walked slowly towards him across the herb-strewn rushes; like a pure candle flame, thought Henriette wonderingly, amongst the noise and bawdiness of this riotous feast. Ralf grinned round at his comrades, who watched speechless as the lady approached. 'Isn't she a little beauty, now?' boasted Ralf. 'She's convent-bred, comrades - but she's long since forgotten her convent ways,

I tell you!' Then he turned to his lady, who had drawn close and stopped. 'I sent for you some time ago. Why have you presumed to take so long?'

Henriette, like everyone else, strained to hear the lady's reply. When she spoke, it was in softly accented French that betrayed her English origins.

'My lord Ralf. You must understand that this is no place for me. With your permission, I shall now retire.'

Ralf grabbed her slender wrist and pulled her down beside him. She winced, but was silent. 'You have not my permission, lady Elena,' he replied silkily. 'You are my wife, and are sworn to obey me in all things. Sit here, with me.'

Henriette, spellbound, saw the beautiful English lady close her deep blue eyes in what looked very like despair. All the men at the table were silent too, watching her hungrily. One of Ralf's comrades licked his lips. 'She was a nun, you say, Ralf?'

Ralf grinned and stroked his lady's smooth white cheek. 'Aye,' he chuckled. 'A novice, at any rate. She never took her vows. Her English convent was burned down during the troubles in the north, three years ago. Just as well, because she's far too pretty to be a nun, isn't she? Look at her creamy skin, her firm little breasts, her luscious sweet mouth . . .'

Around them the noise of the revellers ebbed and flowed like the roaring of the sea. Henriette's soldier was trying to fondle her again, but she ignored him and leant forward, anxious to catch every word. Another soldier was staring at Elena, before saying to Ralf, 'So. A sweet little virgin from a convent, eh? And you had her first?'

Ralf shook his blond head and poured himself more wine. 'No. This is the best of it, my comrades.' His hand moved round Elena's slender shoulders, stroking her possessively. 'My lovely young bride was in fact trained exceedingly well in the arts of love, by some foreign mercenary who took her captive after the burning of her convent. He used her for his

entertainment for a few months, I gather, and taught her some delightful tricks. But then he left her. The novelty wore off for him, I suppose, as it does. Elena won't even tell me his name. Will you, sweeting?"

Henriette saw how the English lady gazed blindly ahead as Ralf fondled her. She hates her husband, thought Henriette suddenly, hates him! Oh, how she wished to fall in love with her own husband, the knight who was due to arrive here, in Rouen, tonight! Perhaps, she thought suddenly, the lady Elena was still in love with the foreign mercenary Ralf spoke of, the man who seduced her, and then cruelly abandoned her.

Ralf was toying with his wife's breasts, making the nipples stand out hard and tight against the silk of her gown. 'My lord.' The lady Elena's voice was scarcely a whisper. 'I implore you to let me leave this company.'

But Ralf only smiled. 'I thought you were enjoying yourself, my lady wife,' he murmured, still chafing her breasts with his thumb.

'She's a passionate wench, then, Ralf?' muttered another man, leaning drunkenly across the table to gaze at Elena. Ralf's pale blue eyes suddenly hardened.

'I thought so, once. She agreed to marry me quickly enough, didn't you, wench? And she'll do whatever I say - her foreign soldier taught her well. She has such pretty ways, with her mouth, her lips, her tongue. But I fear her little convent-bred heart is cold, cold as ice.' Ralf suddenly seemed very drunk. His hands were pulling at his wife's robes, fumbling at the lacings; at last he managed to pull her bodice apart, so that her small white breasts were exposed. Henriette felt her own excitement simmering at her loins; she heard the man whose knee she perched on growl deep in his throat, and felt his big hands stealing round her waist once more. Ralf, aware of his companions' fascination, pulled at his wife's taut pink nipples thoughtfully. Elena's face was white, desperate. 'Wouldn't

you say,' murmured Ralf, 'that these ripe little beauties were begging for a man's touch, longing to be taken in a man's mouth? But she's no longer interested in such things, comrades. You can swive her till daybreak, and she'll not respond. Believe me, her blood is frozen in her veins.'

'Mayhap it's you!' called a fellow knight. 'Could be your lusty weapon's not stout enough for her, Ralf.'

Ralf, letting go of Elena, lurched across the table and gripped the man by the throat. An overturned goblet sent rivulets of red wine pouring across the table. 'Say that again if you dare!' he hissed. 'I've pleased scores of willing women, and given them no cause for complaint.'

'Gently, gently, Ralf,' soothed another man, gazing longingly at Elena's naked breasts. 'Perhaps our friend Ivo has a point. Perhaps you ought to let someone else mount her, and then you could enjoy watching. A bit of variety might enliven the wench, and make her hotter for you.'

Ralf's eyes narrowed as he sagged back in his seat. Elena's head was bowed in silent suffering, her pale gold hair falling loosely from beneath her kerchief to curtain her cheeks, so Henriette could no longer see her beautiful face. 'You have a point,' scowled Ralf. 'Whatever the solution, I'm beginning to think I had a poor bargain of our marriage.'

So did the lady Elena, thought Henriette, stricken with curiosity over this gentle, lovely woman whose dark blue eyes were haunted by unhappiness. She wondered why her husband Ralf was so cruel to her. Oh, how she hoped her own husband-to-be would prove to be worthy.

They were all suddenly diverted by a huge bellow of laughter from the table over near the fire. The ritual humiliation of the young squires was proceeding apace. Yet another young squire, shy and embarrassed, was having difficulty in performing the allotted task. The women, laughing heartily, were taking it in turns to toy with his reluctant penis, competing in their efforts to coax it into hardness. Elena's torment was forgotten for the moment as

Ralf, Ivo, Armand and the rest craned their necks or even stood up to see better across the noisy room. Elena sat very still, with her head bowed, as if wishing herself a hundred miles from here; but Henriette was glad to be in the midst of it all. She scrambled on to one of the benches with Armand's help, and laughed aloud to see everyone cheering noisily as the youth's pale, slender penis grew quiveringly erect at last.

One of the women, crowing in triumph, pushed her female companion aside and bent to lick the squire's genitals lasciviously with her darting tongue; the young man shuddered and cried out in rapture. Then the woman lay back on the trestle, her plump legs dangling apart, and rucked up her skirts temptingly. The youth dived for her with a groan of longing, fumbling with eager fingers at her exposed mound; the woman reached out to grasp his slender penis and, with a grin, coaxed him to enter her.

The youth was transfixed with pleasure. So was Henriette, who was leaning against the broad shoulders of her muscular admirer Armand and watching the crude coupling with radiant delight. She'd never seen anything like this in her father's banquetting chamber. The youth was starting to fumble at the doxy's heavy breasts, and began, tentatively, to thrust between her thighs. The older knights around him roared encouragement and banged their goblets on the table as his scrawny hips clenched with effort. Henriette licked her lips, feeling how her own nipples were hard with excitement, her secret flesh plump and slick between her thighs. She rubbed her legs together in agitation. And then Armand pulled her down suddenly into his lap again and murmured hotly in her ear.

'Like watching that sort of thing, do you, wench? Fancy a bit of sport yourself, eh?'

Henriette had fallen with a gasp into his arms. He kissed her, hard. Then his big, calloused hand cupped her breasts, chafing her stiffened nipples deliciously through the coarse

fabric of her gown. At the same time his other hand slid down between her thighs, and his thick forefinger probed at the folds of her skirt and began to rub deliberately against her swollen mound, finding her delicate cleft and sliding up and down it, sending shivers to her very soul. Dear God, the soldier would feel how wet she was, how much she wanted him. As Armand's hot tongue roughly probed her mouth, she squirmed her hips with delight, and felt the outline of his strong, thick penis pressing hard against her from beneath his tunic. How she'd enjoy feeling that stout shaft jumping about inside her, thought Henriette rather dazedly.

The doxy who was sprawled on the table beneath the young squire was screaming out her delight now. Her bare legs were drawn high, and her fists thumped the table as the youth drove into her, faster and faster. His face was pink with pleasure, his bottom was jerking spasmodically; the men around him were banging their winecups in time to his feverish thrusts. The crowd had shifted slightly, and when Henriette's soldier stopped kissing her, she caught a tantalising glimpse of the youth's slender shaft diving in and out; then, just as he was about to reach his crisis, two laughing, burly knights wrenched him out of the woman, and his hot penis twitched across the woman's belly, his seed spurting frantically as he gasped out his pleasure. Henriette watched, transfixed with lust. At the same time her own grinning soldier pressed hard with his fingers against her cleft, rubbing her wet little nub of pleasure through the fabric of her gown while his other hand fondled her breast. Henriette caught her breath in rapture and spasmed desperately beneath his wickedly probing hand, clamping her lips shut to stifle her little moans as her secret, intense orgasm racked her body.

The soldier Armand laughed softly and nuzzled her soft cheek with his lips. 'Liked that, didn't you? But I'll wager you could do with more.' He took her small hand and shifted it so she could feel the hard thickness of his shaft stirring

beneath his tunic. 'How about you and me finding a quiet place outside of here, sweetheart, so we can get things done properly?'

Henriette, who was only just starting to breathe again, grinned with delight. Oh, yes. She longed to feel his sturdy cock pleasuring her voluptuous wetness. But, just as she was drawing breath to reply, the big doors at the far end of the hall were flung open, and an icy draught of air blasted the room. Wreaths of smoke were driven from the great fire up into the soot-blackened rafters, and the candles in their iron sconces shivered and danced. A nervous silence gripped the hall. If this was the fearsome Duke of Normandy, returned a day early from his parley with the King of France, then his anger at these scenes of debauchery in the very heart of his stronghold would indeed be something to daunt the stoutest soldier. The exhausted lad on the table pulled himself hastily from his doxy's arms and scuttled off into the shadows, pulling up his hose; the others slunk back to their seats. Someone coughed nervously. All eyes were turned towards the door, and the blackness that lay outside.

A man came in. The wintry sleet glittered on his thick, tawny hair, and on the long cloak of fine grey wool that covered his gleaming armour. Behind him were soldiers; a silent, formidable coterie of about a dozen men. Amongst their number was a foreigner with skin as black as night, with a curved sword pushed into his belt. Henriette watched, her eyes wide with excitement.

The leader of the men, tall and wide-shouldered, faced the silence contemptuously as his cold grey eyes swept the crowded hall. He took it all in; the drunken, cowering knights, the spilled wine, the sprawling, half-dressed doxies. Then he said, in a clear, chilling voice, 'I have come to Rouen to offer my sword to Duke William of Normandy. But I see - all too plainly - that he is not here.' His gaunt face twisted in scorn. Henriette noticed, with a sudden thumping

of her heart, that a faded silver sword scar slashed his right cheek. 'Tell me,' he went on, 'have I come to the right place? Is this really the formidable Tower of Rouen, or is it some backstreet whorehouse?'

There was a breathless silence. Then the duke's seneschal, who'd been hiding in the kitchens away from the racket of the hall, came hurrying towards the newcomer, wringing his hands and grovelling out an apology. 'My lord! You are indeed welcome. The banquet is almost over, my lord; but there is another private chamber, down on the next floor, where you and your men can be served with food and wine in peace, while you rest, and recover yourselves after your journey.'

The seneschal's anxiety was genuine. For the last few days, powerful stranger knights and barons had been arriving in Rouen with their retinues. They'd been summoned by William from his lands in England and Normandy, to vow their allegiance for a renewal of the campaign in Maine. They were influential men, and it was dangerous to offend them. Still wringing his hands, the seneschal led the tall, stern-faced knight and his followers through an inner doorway, towards the spiral stone staircase that led down to another, smaller banqueting chamber. Slowly everyone relaxed.

But not quite everyone, Henriette suddenly realised. Because the beautiful lady Elena was sitting as if frozen with shock, her hands pressed across her breasts, the colour draining from her face as she watched the scarred, handsome knight until he was gone from sight. 'No,' she was breathing, 'no, it cannot be . . .'

Henriette shrugged to herself. The English lady was obviously in a state of distress from her husband's cruel mockery. Henriette was becoming a bit bored with Elena, and was also finding herself rather jealous, because she was so beautiful. She herself was more interested in hearing what the others were saying about this intriguing new

arrival, because a sudden wild hope had started to flicker in her mind.

‘That man’s nothing but a jumped-up mercenary from the looks of him,’ Ralf was snorting contemptuously. ‘He’s obviously lived by his sword, and would change sides again as soon as some other lord offered him more gold than Duke William. Did you see the scar on his face? Wonder who he is?’

Ivo suddenly leant forward. ‘I remember him,’ he breathed. ‘He’s the Breton mercenary who fought at Hastings and saved Duke William’s life. He was rewarded with a valuable fief in the north of England. But he fell out with William two winters ago. You remember the unrest in Flanders? The Flemish count sent for aid from his ally, Duke William – but William offered to send only ten English knights, a pitiful force.’

The others nodded, murmuring. They were all soldiers. They remembered.

‘Well,’ continued Ivo, ‘that Breton mercenary we’ve just seen, he argued with the duke, told him it was shameful to treat his ally Flanders thus. William was furious with him for being so outspoken. The scarred Breton mercenary stormed off, went with his own force to help the tiny contingent of Englishmen who fought for the count of Flanders. He was wounded and captured in the ensuing battle.’

‘The Battle of Bavinchove?’ put in another sombrely.

‘Aye, the Battle of Bavinchove. Two years ago, in February. A disaster for the count of Flanders, and for those who supported him. William, meanwhile, still in high dudgeon, had stripped the Breton of all his English lands, as punishment for defying him. So he’d lost everything, along with his freedom.’

‘But surely,’ said Henriette, enthralled, ‘William must have repented and paid for the brave knight’s ransom?’

‘No. You know our duke; his anger can last months, years, even, and he will never admit that he’s wrong. The Breton

was ransomed eventually by some friend of his, a rich French widow, whose name, like the Breton's, eludes me. Apparently she was his mistress. She tended him well, I believe, and by all accounts didn't want to let him go.' He grinned. 'They say that all the women go wild for the man, in spite of that ferocious scar.'

'Don't suppose they're looking at his face when he pleasures them,' sneered Ralf. 'Anyway, what's he doing here, in Rouen, if he's fallen out with Duke William?'

Ivo broke in. 'I think I know. Apparently, our fine duke has begun to experience a certain amount of remorse over the slaughter at Bavinchove. He's summoned the Breton back into the fold, has offered him marriage with a young French heiress and the restoration of his English lands. In return for his sword, of course.'

Henriette's heart had started to thump so loudly she thought everyone must hear it. 'His name?' she whispered. 'Please. Doesn't anyone know his name?'

To her amazement, it was the lady Elena who answered her. Swiftly, silently, she'd got to her feet. Her small white hands were clasping her torn bodice together as she breathed, 'His name is Aimery. Aimery le Sabrenn.' Then she turned quickly, before Ralf could stop her, and hurried from the room.

Ivo thumped the table in drunken acknowledgement. 'God's wounds, but she's right - that's his name, I remember it now. Aimery le Sabrenn - that's Breton for Aimery the Swordsman.' He laughed coarsely. 'They say he was given the name on account of the long sword he wields, though I've heard that many a pretty wench has swooned over the way he wields his other, more private weapon.'

Henriette felt quite weak with excitement. She couldn't believe it, though it must be true. She'd come here tonight, full of trepidation, in order to catch a glimpse of her husband-to-be. Well, she'd had her glimpse, and it was more than enough. That beautiful, stern-faced knight, the man

who had silenced the rowdy hall with one look, was in truth the man she had been waiting for all her life. Aimery le Sabrenn - her father had told her his name, weeks and weeks ago. Tomorrow she would meet him, at her father's house, for their betrothal. She could hardly wait. And the thought of their marriage night made her quite faint with anticipation. She must get home, immediately, and sneak back in through the servants' door, and prepare herself for meeting him in the morning.

Her soldier, who was still holding her on his lap, was starting to fondle her again. Henriette had forgotten about him.

"'Tis my turn now, wench," Armand was murmuring. "How about a bit of attention for me? Let's go outside for a while. There are some sheds over behind the granary where we'll be nice and secret. I'll pleasure you nicely with my stout shaft - you must be as hungry for it as I am."

Henriette remembered the feel of his swollen penis against her palm, and felt a stab of regret. Then she thought of Aimery le Sabrenn. "Sorry," she declared, planting a kiss on his weatherbeaten cheek, "but I've got to go." And, jumping up lightly before he could stop her, she ran towards the door and was soon lost to his sight.

"Damn," muttered Armand angrily. "Damn. I thought I was well set up there."

"Plenty more where she came from," said another soldier consolingly.

No. Armand shook his head. She was different, that wench. Lovely curling chestnut hair, soft and scented. Creamy skin and big brown eyes that danced with mischief. Plump, voluptuous breasts. She spoke and acted like a lady, except that she hadn't been a lady when he made her dance and moan secretly in his arms.

Armand sighed regretfully and, reaching for another jug of wine, decided to get drunk instead.

Chapter Two

ELENA KNEELED ON the stoneflagged floor of the little chapel, high up on the fourth floor of Rouen's mighty tower. She could hear the gusts of chilly, sleet-laden wind hurling themselves against the thick stone walls, and she shivered, knowing that the air outside must be as cold as her heart.

'Please, God,' she prayed, 'oh please. Stop me loving him so much. Stop it hurting so much.'

She would have to get away from here, from Rouen, from Normandy. Tonight she would tell her husband Ralf - if he was in a fit state to listen to her - that she was leaving for England, on the morning tide.

She'd thought, at first, that she could learn to love Ralf. At least, she'd thought that she could endure her fate.

But the sight this evening of the only man she had ever loved storming his way into the banqueting hall, just as he'd once stormed his way into her heart, had shown her that even endurance was beyond her now. Everything about him tore at her soul. She was still hopelessly in love with Aimery le Sabrenn, the man who had seduced her and then gone back to his former mistress, Isobel de Morency.

This tower had become her prison. She had to escape.

Suddenly the door behind her began to creak open. For one wild moment Elena thought it might be Aimery, but of course it couldn't be, because he didn't even know she was here, in Rouen. And even if he did, why should he trouble to seek her out? Ralf's hateful friends had said that he was making some rich marriage to an eligible young heiress, at the bidding of Duke William. No doubt he and Isobel would break the girl's heart, just as they'd broken hers.

She turned round slowly. It was Ralf. He looked uncertain, hazy with drink; his thick blond hair was ruffled and untidy. She tried to remember why she'd once thought she could learn to love him. He moved towards her, frowning.

'You're my wife,' he muttered, 'my wife. You belong with me, in my bed. I won't have you skulking up here, amongst the crosses and candles, as if you were still back in your damned convent. Do you hear me?'

Elena shook herself free of his grip. A flush of rebellion warmed her delicate cheeks. 'I came here for sanctuary, my lord. Since you chose to abuse me, and humiliate me in front of your friends, I hoped that at least here I would be safe.'

He gripped her again, and this time she couldn't escape. 'So you say I humiliate you, do you?' he growled. 'By God, wench, it was I who lowered myself into marrying you. What are you? Just a base-born Saxon girl, abandoned as a babe at a convent; the debauched leavings of some nameless mercenary knight who took his fill of you then rode on his way. If I hadn't offered to marry you, where would you be now?' He sneered, cupping her face, twisting it up to meet his. 'You'd be earning your living on your back, in some poxy whorehouse, that's where. And you wouldn't earn much, either, I can tell you!'

Elena gazed defiantly up at him, her blue eyes wide with scorn. 'Then let me go. Let me depart, my lord. Let me go back to England, and find some convent that will take me in. I want nothing more.'

Ralf shuddered. He felt confused and tired. He wished he hadn't drunk so much wine. She was beautiful, his wife Elena. Sometimes he wished he'd never seen her, with her bewitching face, and her hair like pale spun gold, and her cold, cold heart. He'd thought that by following William's call to arms and bringing her here with him to Rouen, she would learn to be interested in him again. He was wrong. But he was damned if he would let her go.

The scorn in her eyes drove him wild, banishing any lingering feelings of tenderness. By God, she was beautiful, the bitch, and he'd arouse her to passion tonight if it was the last thing he did. Perhaps his friends had been right. *'Let someone else mount her,'* Ivo had said. *'Then at least you could enjoy watching.'*

'You're going nowhere, my sweet wife,' he snarled, 'except to my bed.' He gripped her hand; she stumbled after him, knowing she had no choice.

Their bedroom was a small, square chamber set in the deep thickness of the tower's stone walls, with just a single high, narrow window, and a heavy, barred door to secure it. A straw palliass on the floor and a wooden chest for linen were the only furnishings. Ralf and his wife were lucky to have that much, considering the crowds that filled Rouen this Eastertide. Slowly Elena followed Ralf inside, and he lit a wax candle in a bracket on the wall. Then, as the yellow flame washed the room with light, she recoiled and backed quickly towards the door.

'My lord,' she whispered through dry lips. 'I see you have company enough for tonight. I will find somewhere else to sleep.'

Ralf reached out to pull her back. His hand still fastened round her wrist, he turned to bolt the heavy door. 'Ah, but you are needed too. Stay and watch. You might just learn something.'

Elena leant against the roughly mortared wall, her heart thudding sickly against her chest. No. No, she would not endure it.

There was a man in their chamber: a rough-looking servant man, wearing a drab tunic and the leather apron of the kitchens. There were two women with him as well, two of the doxies the soldiers had been making free with down in the banqueting hall. The small chamber smelled overpoweringly of their cheap perfume, their unwashed bodies, the musky reek of their arousal. They'd hardly

noticed Elena and Ralf coming in, because one of the sluts, the plump blonde one, was on her knees before the man, openly mouthed his phallus, which was hugely erect. Meaningfully licking her red lips, she was sucking and caressing at the straining shaft, and fondling the heavy sac of his testicles. The man shuddered with delight, then, catching sight of Elena, he grinned at her, his eyes roving over her body lasciviously. Elena, sickened, turned away; but Ralf grabbed her, forced her round.

‘Watch this, my lady Elena,’ he growled. ‘You had some pretty tricks once, remember? I thought the sight of this might remind you. Watch Master Alain here. He’s a favourite with all the women in the tower, and you can see why.’

The man Alain was beginning to thrust his stiff member rapturously into the blonde woman’s mouth. The other, darker woman was leaning over them, watching avidly, taking Alain’s free hand and putting it over her bare, heavy breasts. Her eyes gleamed greedily as she stared at the man’s thick-veined shaft, which was glossy from the kneeling woman’s encircling mouth as he pumped steadily in and out. Suddenly the watching woman sprang at her busy friend and pushed her aside. ‘My turn! My turn now!’

The other woman howled with rage, and the two of them rolled on the floor, clawing and spitting at one another, their breasts bared, their hair flying. Then suddenly Alain was on the floor with them, wrestling the blonde woman to one side, furiously pushing up her ragged skirts as his big penis throbbed hungrily. The woman grabbed him. ‘Oh, please,’ she moaned. ‘Take me now, Alain. I’m so wet for you.’ She wrapped her legs round his stalwart hips, clawing with her fingers at his back, and he thrust himself into her with a grunt, pleasuring her with slow, deep strokes that made her cry aloud with rapture. The other woman had crawled into the corner and was watching, angry, defeated.

Ralf still held Elena tight, but his eyes were on the couple on the floor, and his expression was hot with lust. Elena

watched them too, in despair. Dear God, she thought, Ralf, her husband, was wrong to think she was cold. She was on fire as she watched the crude mating going on in front of her. Her breasts ached and burned with desire, and her nipples pressed hungrily against her silk bodice. Her vagina pulsed tormentingly as she watched master Alain's thick penis burying itself again and again in the plump doxy's wetness, saw how his rough tongue rasped at her bared pink nipples. Then his big thumb moved to stroke at the woman's clitoris, and he began to thrust harder; and the woman started to cry out, in the opening throes of her climax. Elena closed her eyes. Her body was racked with torment, and it was Aimery she was thinking of, Aimery's devastating kiss she remembered, Aimery's strong yet skilful fingers stroking her body, while his burning shaft pulsed deep within her, driving her into undreamt-of ecstasy.

The dark-haired woman, watching jealously from her corner, had had enough of being a spectator. Suddenly she sprang across the room and flung herself in front of Ralf. Before he even realised what she intended, she was quickly untying the lacing of his hose, gasping in delight as his hotly aroused penis sprang out. 'This one,' she crooned avidly, 'will do for me.' She began to run Ralf's swollen cock firmly across her bare breasts, muttering lewdly as the glossy knob caressed her engorged brown nipples. Ralf gasped and swore aloud. Then he grasped her by her loose hair, and threw back his head in a paroxysm of delight as the girl began to squeeze his hot shaft between her pillowy breasts; and Ralf, already excited beyond endurance, lost control and began to spurt fiercely across her plump bosom.

'That's what you like, isn't it, my lord?' murmured the girl happily. 'What a lovely cock you've got. And this is only the start.' Dreamily she used his still-throbbing penis to rub the sticky semen into her nipples, while Ralf panted and leant back against the wall in ecstasy.