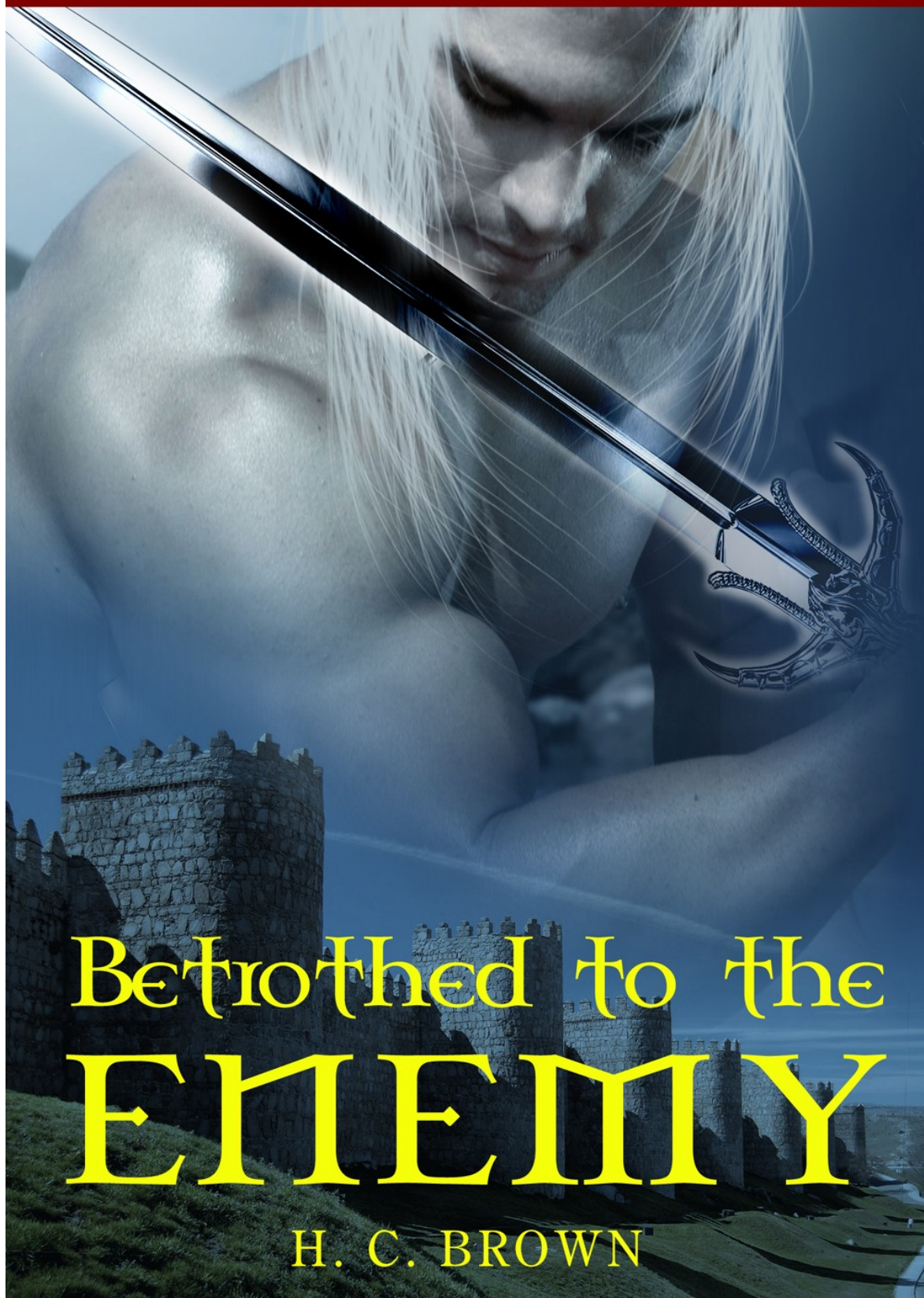
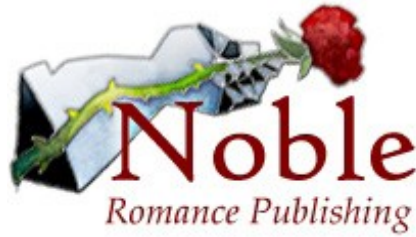


Noble Romance Publishing





www.nobleromance.com

Betrothed to the Enemy

ISBN 978-1-60592-039-9

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Betrothed to the Enemy Copyright 2009 H. C. Brown

This book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any existing means without written permission from the publisher. Contact Noble Romance Publishing, LLC at PO Box 467423 Atlanta, GA 31146.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. The characters are products of the author's imagination and used fictitiously.

Book Blurb:

After her father's death at the Battle of Hastings, Lady Angela of Parr is defenseless. Dragged from her estate and taken to London, she finds herself at the mercy of a ruthless Norman king.

William, the new king of England, plans to repay his loyal knights by offering them marriage to the landed Saxon ladies. Angela has no love for the Normans and puts her reputation in jeopardy by secretly meeting a young Norman knight, Sir Damien de Anesi. Their love blossoms until King William betroths her to a depraved old man.

Will Sir Damien turn against his liege and risk all to save Lady Angela from a fate

worse than death?

Chapter One

London, 1070

“Put it away, Meg, for I fear I have no more tears to shed.” Angela brushed aside the bunched cotton cloth offered by her maidservant, lifted her chin and stepped into the noisy Great Hall.

Guards stood oppressively close; musky male scent rose from their warm bodies enhanced by the dampness from the incessant freezing rain. Angela glanced at her ashen-faced maidservant and straightened her soaking wet head rail. She forced back her anger at the treatment they had received, having been carelessly bundled into an old cart without time to pack more than the essentials. The sun had hardly peeked over the horizon when Sir Paul de Groote had arrived with his troops. An impressively tall, soft-spoken knight, he carried a missive from the newly crowned king. All unwed landed ladies, widows or maidens of childbearing age, he announced, were being summoned to Hertfordshire immediately.

Bad enough the proud Saxon men were brutally slain and left to rot on the battlefield, but since the invasion, their mourning wives and daughters lived in constant terror of these foreign-speaking brutes. Indeed, most ladies had little knowledge of the French language. They could not understand why knights ransacked their homes looking for documents or what details they demanded regarding their wealth or lands. The ladies, the poor defenseless souls, believed they’d been bundled into carts bound for London to meet their death.

Now, standing just inside the Great Hall, Angela tried in vain to control her trembling knees as the king’s man announced her name. Sir Paul beckoned her

forward with an encouraging smile and her stomach twisted. This king was a tyrant and he cared nothing for the Saxons. Her head ached in fear of standing alone before such a butcher. I will do this for my father, she decided. She stepped forward, her head erect and back straight as she crossed the wooden floor toward Sir Paul.

Angela took in Berkhamsted Castle's magnificent Great Hall. Wood walls rose high on each side; one covered in a magnificent tapestry, the other showcasing a large variety of weaponry. A shiver raced down her spine as she viewed the gruesome death of King Harold depicted in callous detail in brightly colored wools. The great king had been wounded in the eye and then hacked to pieces. How he would turn in his grave if he could hear French spoken within these walls.

Allowing her gaze to wander, Angela suppressed a gasp as she glimpsed an impressive row of knights standing straight and proud, each watching her entrance with interest. They followed her progress toward the two golden thrones at the end of the hall. Angela avoided their gazes, feeling somewhat like a prize horse offered up for sale. She kept her eyes toward the front, where the Norman King William and Queen Matilda reclined surrounded by a swarm of buzzing advisors and priests in long red robes.

Sir Paul turned, genuflected and offered his arm. Angela accepted his escort and they walked briskly toward the king. When they stopped before the thrones, Sir Paul bowed respectfully as Angela curtsied low, keeping her eyes down and her lips pressed into a thin line.

"Lady Angela of Parr. Her estate is in Cornwall. She is fluent in French, Your Majesty," Sir Paul said in meticulous French.

King William leaned back in his throne before passing an inaudible comment to Queen Matilda. He then turned his gaze and his attention toward Angela.

"I am pleased you speak our language. It will enable my wishes be conveyed to the other landed ladies of this England. It would be in their best interest to accept the betrothals I have arranged with my barons. Indeed, it would do much for the stability of England."

Angela released a deep breath and in an effort to quell her rising fear, pressed one trembling hand firmly to her stomach. "Will you exact a penalty for those not

willing to submit to your plan, Your Majesty?"

William snorted angrily and slapped a thick hand down upon the throne's red velvet arm.

"Indeed I shall; those who will not comply will find themselves bound in servitude to the church. Those ungrateful wenches shall be anchored to a convent for the rest of their miserable lives. They shall remain secluded within a small cell and made to work hard for their keep."

Angela valiantly tried to suppress a shudder as she lifted her eyes briefly to fully examine the great king. Her heart thundered in her chest as he glared in her direction with piercing blue eyes. His mouth formed a thin, hard line as if set in stone. The Norman King William was not as she expected. He overflowed his throne, a man of great girth. Dirty blond hair hung limply to his shoulders, framing his ruddy, round face. She could hardly believe this insignificant man had killed her father, destroyed her life, and brought England to its knees. Without a doubt, his army must be one of goliath proportions. Not so, his queen. The woman was no more than a dwarf with the countenance of a jester. Angela hastily dropped her gaze to avoid any further offense, deciding capitulation was the better option.

"The ladies are fearful, Highness. They do not understand the language of your guards. I beg lenience on their behalf until I can explain your most generous offer."

"Very well, in that case you will remain here indefinitely and encourage the women to agree with my wishes. You will speak for the good of England. You shall inform them their past lives are over. There will be no looking back to Saxon times, and they must embrace the opportunity of a future with my barons. If you serve me well, Lady Angela of Parr, I will see you wed to one of my finest knights."

Sir Damien de Anesi squared his ample shoulders, rested his gloved hand on the hilt of his sword, smiled mischievously, and wiggled his eyebrows at his elder brother, Robert.

"This one is a fine specimen. Her skin is as fair as a ripe peach and she is deliciously rounded and well fed. Look at the wildness in her eyes, the tip of her

chin; methinks she would be feisty. Mayhap I will petition our good King William for her hand."

Robert inclined his head slightly. "I think many will want *that* prize. I hear she has a fine mind for her one and twenty years and that she speaks our tongue fluently. Sir Paul informed me she stood toe-to-toe with him and demanded to read the king's missive personally before allowing him to step inside her manor. He mentioned she learned our language from her grandmother. In fact, she is of French blood. Her grandmother is Madame Beaujolais. Her father died heirless at Hastings, leaving his lands in her tender hands. Trust me, brother; *many* will be seeking her hand, as indeed will I."

Sir Paul chatted about the inclement English weather as he escorted Angela to her chamber. He was mayhap five and thirty, tall and thin. His clothes hung limp as if he had suffered much of late. A cruel red scar under one eye marred a once handsome face. He was most unusual for a Norman knight, softly spoken and polite, his eyes displaying a deep, haunting sadness. He opened a door to a bleak, tiny room at the end of a cold dark passageway and stood to one side as they entered.

"I am sorry, milady, that this room is so dismal. You will be moved to more suitable accommodation as soon as you are betrothed." He bowed, turned, then left them alone.

Angela surveyed the dismal space reserved for her and Meg with contempt. She pulled her cloak around her body as small comfort against the rain that misted incessantly from a high barred window. Rainwater spilled down the mossy walls, forming puddles on the floor. The room was no more than a cell with one substantial brocade covered bed and a rickety pallet. Wind whistled down the chimney, spreading ashes across the stark stone floor. Thank goodness a large quantity of logs and kindling overflowed a copper bucket beside the cold grate; they would need a good fire to warm the freezing air. Sitting down gingerly on one of the two chairs set beside a small round table, she looked around in dismay. Examining the miserly food before her, she found a bowl of apples, a small loaf of bread, and a wedge of cheese. Over the back of the other chair hung a bulging wine skin dripping its rich

contents into an ever-growing red puddle on the floor.

"This fare is not sufficient; I do believe we will find our way to the kitchen when you have set that fire."

Meg rose from her knees before the hearth, brushing her hands on her apron. "Yes, milady. I am sure I smelled suckling pig roasting."

Two solid oak chests displaying the Parr family crest and a small bundle containing Meg's meager possessions sat on the floor beside the door. Meg busied herself lighting a fire while Angela took the keys from the cord at her waist and unlocked the chests. She withdrew a suitable gown and cloak and tossed them on the bed.

Angela could not contain the feelings of deep resentment as she unclipped the broach at her neck and removed her sodden head rail. She who hated the Normans with a passion had no choice now but to be an ally to the king! William's use of her to convince the grieving Saxon women to accept the Norman butcher's betrothals was insulting. He was using their fear against them in a truly wicked way. But what other option did she have? She was a woman alone, a lady of great wealth with lands valued by the new king.

Her father's loyal guards had died beside him and she had no army or betrothed to protect her. She was here at the king's mercy, brought to London to be married against her will. Indeed, she was little more than a prisoner. Each day spent suffering at the hands of these Normans became more gruesome than the next. Was it not enough that a rough-handed Norman practically dragged her from the cart in the pouring rain, that she had been forced to go before the king? Must she now endure these hardships as well? She sat heavily on the bed, making herself as comfortable as possible on the lumpy straw mattress, and began unwinding her long, black braid.

"My hair is too wet to leave covered; I will catch my death in this awful room, but mayhap it will dry in the warmth of the kitchen."

"Aye, milady; would seem many of the womenfolk here are doing the same, but it would not be proper for a Saxon lady go about with her hair down and uncovered." Meg took the pale blue head rail and set it before the roaring fire to dry.

Angela lifted her chin defiantly. "I do not believe the term *proper* exists in William the Bastard's court."

Meg's eyes filled with fear and she covered her mouth with a clenched fist. "Please, milady, do not use that name here; I am fearful you will be overheard."

"Have no fear, Meg. Most likely the guards do not speak our language but I *will* hold my tongue. I have great difficulty, when my faith is so strong, believing that God in His Divine Right delivered England and us to this monster. My father was a good and just man, as were many who perished beside King Harold. They died for nothing."

"Come now, milady. Your dear father and our king died for the glory of England. You should curb your anger. The knights are not foolish; your disrespect for the king is clear in any language."

"I doubt *my* lot could get any worse. It would seem I am condemned to wed a *Norman* knight! It seems such a disastrous fate to me and many good Saxon women. What injustice that he delivers us as gifts to the very knights that killed our men! It grieves me that my father died to protect our lands and I *must* comply with the king's wishes to survive or our bloodline will not prevail."

After Angela dressed in dry clothes she stood gazing into the red and orange flames dancing in the ash-filled grate. In the four years since her father's death at the Battle of Hastings there had been no offer of marriage. She blamed her lack of suitors on the fact that the few remaining eligible Saxons preferred a fragile, dainty woman and she was headstrong and robust.

She was suspicious of the new king. It was his intention to wed his barons to landed Saxon women. But as weeks passed into years following William's coronation with no taxes collected from her holdings, she had begun to hope that the king had overlooked her. Nevertheless, Sir Paul de Groot's arrival at Parr Manor had been inevitable. As an heiress, she knew the reprieve had only been temporary. The missive the knight read from the king demanded that she agree to marry a Norman knight or relinquish her manor to the crown.

Her father's grim face as he turned his horse to leave for that last disastrous battle flashed across her mind. 'Twas obvious he knew his cause was doomed. His

last soft words etched deeply into her memory:

You are the last of our line. Whatever God decides for me in this coming battle you must remain strong. You will do whatever is necessary to ensure that our blood retains this land. Our people depend on us, daughter. Do not let them fall foul of a vicious Norman lord. If it must be, use your womanly wiles to control him. Be strong in your conviction, as this is one battle you are well equipped to win.

Pushing her lips tightly together, Angela masked the deep feelings of loss that forever racked her being. She tossed her long hair over one shoulder, moved to the door and removed the large, ornate key.

“Come. We will lock this door behind us for safety.” She ushered Meg from the room and secured the door.

A cool wind whistled along the narrow corridors and they were grateful for the soft glow from the candles as they made their way down a dark, tight spiral staircase. Leaving the keep, they followed a wider passageway that ran beside the Great Hall. They moved swiftly in single file toward the delightfully savory aromas emanating from the kitchen. They met guards, knights and servants along the way, but no one questioned them. In fact, they inclined their heads or bowed respectfully then moved on. The warm, inviting kitchen was a hive of activity. The cook – a rotund man with bright red cheeks – greeted them merrily. They watched with interest as he ran the kitchen with military precision.

Angela and Meg sat at a wide table beside the bread oven and feasted on large bowls of hot pottage and hunks of bread fresh from the oven. Across the room, Angela noticed two young boys taking turns basting an enormous roasting pig while an older boy, his hands wrapped in rags, turned the spit. She tipped her head one way then the other to inhale the delicious aromas. To her right, dozens of loaves of bread sat cooling in lines across a scrubbed wooden table. To her left, spiced apples bubbled in a huge cauldron, filling the air with the sweet smell of cinnamon.

Pink-faced women in large white aprons prepared various delicious dishes. The cook flitted from table to table tasting one dish after another like a large

butterfly. A young Saxon girl with soft round eyes served them mulled wine in silver goblets. She appeared anxious and Angela questioned her gently. The child, who introduced herself as Ruth, told Angela she'd taken two tiny kittens from the stables earlier that day. Her duties prevented her from returning them, and their pitiful cries were distressing her.

"It was unwise to play with such young kittens, but not to worry, I will gladly return them to their mother," Angela said. She brushed the crumbs from her hands and stood.

Ruth hurried away, returning a moment later with two ginger and white kittens. She thrust them into Angela's hands and bobbed a curtsy. She grabbed up the dirty trenchers with a happy smile and vanished into the flurry of workers.

A guard directed Angela to a vast wooden building attached to the bailey. Clutching the small, mewling animals to her chest, she followed the cloisters to the end of the courtyard with Meg at her side, muttering her displeasure. The long walkway was dark and deserted, and incessant rain soaked the stone pathway.

Angela dashed across the courtyard and stepped into the warm stables. Rows of various colored horses greeted her, nodding their heads agreeably over the stalls. The sweet scent of hay filled the air. At the far end, the familiar sound of a smithy's hammer rang out as it met the anvil, followed by the sharp hiss of steam.

Meg touched her arm. "It may not be safe here, milady."

"Nonsense, the smithy is probably a Saxon. I will ask him if he knows the mother of these kittens." She thrust the animals into Meg's arms before making her way deliberately toward the red glow at the end of the stables.

Angela reached the blacksmith as he withdrew a steaming sword from a bucket of water. She stopped in awe and her hand went to her mouth to cover the wicked smile of delight. Standing before her, bare to the waist and encased in a glossy sheen of sweat, stood a very tall young man of perhaps five and twenty. He was wickedly handsome and she immediately felt a blush rushing up her neck and into her cheeks. Angela could not prevent the small gasp that escaped her lips. Her gaze followed the sweep of broad shoulders and drifted down to a golden chest rippling with glistening muscles. Long, brown fingers lifted the heavy sword toward

the ceiling as his forearms and biceps tensed delightfully, showing impressive bulk. Thin white scars crossed his right forearm, a stark contrast to his golden skin. As if sensing her arrival, he turned in one fluid movement, sending a shock of long, blond wavy hair falling over one shoulder. He gripped the sword tightly as he lifted his square chin in challenge. Deep violet-blue hooded eyes observed her questioningly beneath the longest lashes she had ever seen on a man. He was pure sin in the guise of an archangel.

She knew to gaze on a man in this manner was brazen and reckless, but she could not turn away, felt drawn to his gaze by some strange magic. A breath whistled between his teeth as he swung the sword down to the ground with a swish. Angela quivered while he stood for some moments observing her shamelessly before his full, sensual lips lifted at the corners.

“May I be of assistance, my lady?” he questioned in French.

Angela had some difficulty focusing on anything other than his magnetic lustful gaze and it was some seconds before she replied.

“Yes, I believe there is a cat in this stable that is missing two kittens.” She gestured Meg forward with the two mewling fluff balls.

“Little Ruth promised me she would not remove them; allow me to replace them, my lady..” He took a tunic from a nail on the wall and pulled it over his head before leading the women toward the hayloft.

He turned to Meg, held his large hands out to collect the kittens. He smiled at the tiny bundles of fur and touched each one with gentle care.

“It is amazing, is it not, that this normality of life continues regardless of our uncertainty?”

He inclined his head toward Angela respectfully, turned, walked a few strides to a ladder that lead to the hayloft and climbed effortlessly to the top. A Norman blacksmith with such good manners, she concluded. Angela watched in awe as well-proportioned thigh muscles moved fluidly beneath his tight leather breeches, sending an inexplicable yearning flowing to her core. He returned shortly, covered in dust, long strands of hay stuck throughout his hair.

Angela hesitated for a long moment before excusing herself and reaching up

on tip-toe to remove the hay from his golden locks. As he bent toward her, his eyes danced with amusement and his warm, spicy scent engulfed her. She rested a trembling hand on his hard shoulder and inhaled deeply. His intoxicating aroma made her head spin deliciously and stirred forbidden delights deep within.

The smithy arched a brow and laughed. The rich baritone sound sent chills up her spine.

"Within some cultures we would now be betrothed, milady."

Angela smiled coyly. Outrageous, under the circumstances. After all, the man was Norman. But the future was so uncertain and it felt so good to smile.

"Mayhap in that case I should at least know your name, smithy?"

The smithy took her hand formally, bowed low, and kissed her fingers.

"Damien de Anesi, my lady."

Meg coughed and stamped her foot. Angela nodded politely to the smithy and fled the stables without a backward glance.

"It would be prudent to keep this meeting a secret, Meg," she whispered as they slipped through the door into the kitchen.

Damien slid his sword back into the scabbard at his waist. He sauntered from the stables, his mind so centered on the Lady Angela that he totally ignored the obvious interest he attracted from the finely dressed ladies he passed on his way back to the great hall. He smiled, amused she thought him but a lowly smithy. It would be some time before he could erase the arousing memory of her blushing face and coy smile as she reluctantly left the stables.

The glimpse he'd had of her earlier, when she'd been called before the king, did her a great injustice. She was delicious, fair of face with expressive blue eyes as deep as a velvet night sky. Her long, silky raven-colored hair curled under her rounded bottom. He recalled vividly how her damp dress left no doubt that beneath she was soft and curvaceous. Indeed, her hard nipples strained delightfully at the fabric of her bodice. Her fleeting smile, given in true fun, brought forth dimples in rosy cheeks and when she stepped close the soft scent of lavender had befuddled his senses. He was surprised her eyes had conveyed such a deep, sensual longing, one

that matched his own. Fortunately, her maidservant had accompanied her to the stable or he would have stolen a kiss from her and without doubt caused a scandal.

He pondered as he walked, deciding what steps he needed to take to woo her. He could just ask the king for her hand, but she *must* come to him willingly. For now, she was forbidden fruit but *how* he wanted her. He craved her, and knew he must take immediate steps to have her.

Damien sat before the fire in the great hall surrounded by a handful of boisterous knights. He and his brother, Robert, sat together, their heads bent toward each other, deep in conversation.

"I have made my choice. I will take the Lady Lilly of Devon to wife. She is a maiden of one and twenty, slim of build with long blond locks. Indeed, methinks she is the most beautiful of all. I have this day petitioned the king and she is mine if she will have me. I will rule all of her lands including Devon Castle. On the morrow, I am to meet with her and Lady Angela for a formal introduction and to deliver my intentions toward the lady. Will you come with me?" Robert said.

Damien smiled broadly. "Well claimed, and I will gladly escort you. It will give me yet another chance to view the Lady Angela. Indeed, my eyes cannot get enough of her."

Robert waved a finger at his brother. "How is this so? The ladies are well protected from us by the king's order. Only a fool would attempt to steal one from under his watchful gaze. Indeed, I believe to do so would be treason."

Damien threw his head back and laughed. "This is true but I cannot be blamed when *she* came to seek *me* out. I was repairing my blade in the blacksmith's fire when she arrived. She stood observing me with a look I am convinced can only be lust. Methinks she believes me to be a smithy but no matter, on the morrow I will set the matter straight. My intention is to claim this lady, for she is quite delicious, but I will not do so without her consent. I will *not* take a wife that detests me and lies like a dead fish in my bed."

Robert lifted his goblet and waited until Damien lifted his own.

"An oath then; we agree to take our ladies to wife only with their consent."

"Agreed." Damien emptied his goblet and dashed it into the fireplace.

Chapter Two

Angela left her maidservant and entered a small hall set aside for the Saxon ladies' use. She was impressed that at least the king was making a small effort to make the ladies welcome. The hall was warm and decorated with fresh pine branches. Clay pomanders hung from the walls, filled with fragrant spices.

Settling herself at the feasting table beside two nervous women, she discovered they were sisters from Pevensy. They had lost not only their father and brothers but also their betrothed at Hastings. They decided to refuse any offered Norman betrothal and were planning to run to the convent two miles away. Angela understood their deep grief and tried to calm them by explaining the king's plan. Her words fell on deaf ears but roused interest in some of the other women at the other tables who overheard her conversation.

"I have three sons. The eldest is six and although I can support myself I cannot protect my family. We cannot bring back the dead. We must think of the living. How many of us were given in marriage by our fathers to men we hardly knew? This is no different. If the man who claims me is considerate to my sons, then I accept," said a stout woman of perhaps five and twenty, who'd introduced herself as Lady Anne of Somerset.

A long discussion followed and Angela felt her mission from the king would be easier than she had once thought as many of the women were of the same opinion. These ladies were used to the luxury of a fine home and many servants. All had lost the protection of a husband or father and many had children. They were all fearful of the king's intentions and Angela's assertion brought them a small quantity of hope.

Angela enjoyed a feast of roast beef and vegetables before turning her attention to a sumptuous bowl of hot-spiced apples with fresh cream, her meal interrupted when a young squire approached her and bowed low. Thrusting a piece of straw into her hand, he blushed brightly and recited in English.

"Lady Angela of Parr, please forgive my intrusion. I am requested to inform you that the rain has passed and the moon shines brightly. It may, if you have the need, be viewed from the cloisters surrounding the bailey."

He then bowed again and fled from the hall. Angela picked at the small strand of hay with her fingertips as a rush of warmth flooded her body. The *blacksmith* was interested in her. How intriguing; mayhap the king was offering a wife to *all* who served him. Angela hid a wicked smile behind her hand and glanced nervously around at the other ladies. To have such a deliciously handsome man show interest in *her* was wondrous indeed. She had remained chaste to ensure a good marriage to a Saxon, *not* a match to a Norman knight decided by the king. This was something her conscience would not accept. Why then should she save such a gift for a man she could only despise?

She got to her feet, excused herself and walked slowly from the hall. Once out of sight of the other women, she increased her pace, aware she had only a few minutes before Meg would seek her. Casting care to the wind for her potential loss of reputation, she lifted her skirts and walked swiftly. She made her way along the noisy passageway that led beside the Great Hall and slipped into the moonlit cloister. The air here was cool and fresh, long shadows spilled across the paved stone floor that led to the bailey beyond. The castle grounds, bathed in the gentle light of the full moon, provided an eerie backdrop. Her heart very nearly ceased beating when she glimpsed a figure leaning against a stone pillar. Her breath caught in her throat as Damien stepped out of the shadows to greet her.

The blacksmith appeared almost regal. He wore a fine blue woolen tunic, leather breeches with embroidered bindings around the legs such as a knight might wear, and a wool cloak secured at his neck by a gold clasp. A thick leather belt accentuated his slim hips, and a silver sword glittered at his side. Angela faltered and withdrew a nervous breath. *This* man was no blacksmith.

"My Lady Angela, I am truly blessed that you would trust me so," he said, bowing low.

Angela held out her hand for him to kiss but instead he took her elbow and led her into the shadows, secure from view behind the pillars, although bathed in

moonlight.

"I must speak with you, milady, and it would be better *not* to be seen without your maidservant," he said, his breath hot against her cheek.

He stood so sinfully close the wool of his tunic caressed her arm, and his delightful musky scent flooded over her, rendering her incoherent. Without thought, she boldly rested trembling hands on his hard, broad chest and tipped her head to look up at his exceedingly handsome face. She felt a rush of heat flow up her neck as he slipped a hand around her waist and grinned down at her boyishly, showing remarkably white even teeth.

"What is so important that you sent for me, good sir?" she asked, both afraid and yet enthralled to be alone with him.

Damien bent forward. "I want *you*, sweet Lady Angela, an angel in any language." He brushed her cheek with a kiss.

Angela bunched her fingers in his tunic. Under the wall of muscle she could feel his heart beating as his daring words sent waves of longing surging through the pit of her stomach. She should push him away and flee back to the keep but his scent invaded her soul like a strong love potion.

"I must admit your words enthrall me, good sir, but in truth I should not be here for the king intends to marry me to one of his knights." She spoke breathlessly, all thoughts of a ruined reputation fleeing as she melted into his arms.

Damien tipped her chin and kissed her boldly, possessively, his tongue parting her lips and dipping inside. Angela responded immediately, returning his kiss with frenzied fervor. His strong arms felt wonderful wrapped around her. His kiss was soft and gentle and he tasted like cinnamon as he took her lips masterly. She could not prevent the soft moan of loss that escaped her as he pulled away.

"This is well, for I am a knight and if you are willing I will ask the king for your hand." He cupped her face and gazed into her eyes with a smoldering passion.

Angela was so entranced by his hypnotic gaze she could not answer.

"Do you not find me pleasing, my lady?"

"You are the most pleasing man I have ever met, *Sir* Damien, but you do not know me. Mayhap I have a foul temper or feet that smell like cheese."

Damien inclined his head and looked deeply into her eyes. "You will be given to a knight of King William's choice if I do not claim you first. In these times, my lady, choices are few, but I am wealthy, young and will treat you well. I wish to make England my home. I need a wife and although I can see your hesitance, I can also feel your passion. Will you consider my offer?"

"Yes, this would please me, Sir Damien." All her former anger toward the Norman knights vanished as she pulled his head down to boldly claim his lips again.

Damien growled deep in his chest as her body trembled against him. His gaze darted toward the doors of the keep. If he weren't careful, his actions this eve would be his undoing. To touch a Saxon lady in this manner was treason. This fact did nothing to cool his ardor as he fought against the fever that flowed into his loins. He would not take her here in the cold cloisters or in the stable like a milk maid, although he ached to have her soft body naked beneath his own.

He continued to kiss her deeply, tasting the sweet-spiced apples on her breath. She was so soft, so luscious and she melted into his arms as if she belonged there. All reason was lost as she moaned and her hands plunged into his hair to pull him closer. He ran his hand along the front of her gown and cupped her ample breast, the nipple hard against his fingers. She tensed, released a deep breath as he gently flicked her hard peak then reluctantly removed his hand.

"You are a maiden?" he asked more roughly than he intended, as he already knew her answer. Her large blue eyes were innocent but she had a body as ripe as a luscious peach.

Angela looked up at him, her eyes wide pools of wonder. "Aye, Sir Damien, and this was my first kiss. In truth, it was more wonderful than I had ever imagined. I find kissing most agreeable. Indeed *you* make me feel very good."

Damien kissed her nose and whispered close to her ear. "When we are wed, milady, I promise I will make you feel even better."

The door to the keep opened, flooding the bailey with light, and Meg stepped out into the cloisters.

"Lady Angela, are you out here?" she called.

Damien held a finger to his lips, kissed Angela softly then slipped into the darkness.

Stepping from the shadows, Angela replied, "Yes, Meg, I needed some fresh air. It was quite warm in the hall tonight."

Meg rushed toward her looking anxiously from left to right. "It is not seemly for you to be out here alone, milady."

Angela smiled. "Have no fear; this place is deserted. Come. Mayhap they have some of those delicious spiced apples left in the kitchen."

* * * * *

Angela lay in her bed that night listening to Meg's even breathing as she slept soundly on her pallet. Far too excited to sleep, Angela pondered the strange, delicious desires Damien awoke within her. Touching her lips and remembering his gentle kiss, she lay staring at the soft rays of moonlight streaming through the window. Nothing would ever remove his handsome face from her mind. The feel of his hard body against her, his tantalizing scent and masterful kisses were intoxicating. 'Twas as if she were living a magnificent dream.

This eve she had received a message from the king's secretary, Lord Howe. She was to escort Lady Lilly to the ladies' solar after they broke their fast on the morrow and she was to act as a translator for the lord betrothed to her by the king. Lady Lilly of Devon, a diminutive young woman with blond flowing curls, favored any match, provided the knight was at least less than two score. Her dowry was immense and her husband would inherit all her father's lands and estates.

* * * * *

Angela took her time dressing the following morning, deciding on her best blue gown. She donned a head rail, deciding against allowing her hair to hang loose down her back as was the Norman fashion. Queen Matilda preferred her head

uncovered unless she was attending church. Here at Berkhamsted Castle, the Norman noblewomen were influencing the way the Saxon women dressed. Many tried to replicate the gowns of exceptional color with intricate embroidery or fine lace which the Norman ladies had brought to England.

Lady Lilly arrived at the banquet hall looking perfect in a pink linen gown with long, wide sleeves and a bodice weaved with gold thread. She sat beside Angela, her expressive face showing a mixture of excitement and impending doom.

"I have been told this knight will inherit the title of Baron. He has a great deal of his own wealth, is young and quite handsome. I am hoping he is at least willing to learn English, as I fear my knowledge of French is limited." Lady Lilly sighed and toyed with her food.

"I do believe most of the men are trying to learn our language. Better, after all, to be able to converse with the people of their newly appointed manors. Do you know which knight you have been betrothed to?" Angela said. She took a sip from her goblet, savoring the spicy hot cider.

"Aye, I do, Lord de Anesi."

Angela went cold. Her stomach twisted and she gripped the goblet with shaking hands. Sir Damien had chosen another, and she felt lost and deeply betrayed. She bit her lip as she looked at her beautiful, slender companion. Angela sighed. Apparently, not even a Norman could find her curves attractive.

Throughout the remainder of the meal, Angela said very little to her companion. When they finished eating, she straightened her back and dragged her leaden feet to the ladies' solar. Lilly chatted nervously at her side, her voice an annoying twitter. Consumed by jealousy, Angela kept her replies short and sharp as daggers.

The door to the solar hung open. A wide fireplace held a roaring fire. Four chairs and a small table laden with refreshments were positioned before the hearth. Sir Damien—*her* Sir Damien—stood in the middle of the room with his back to the fire. As they entered, he greeted them with a stunning smile and bowed low. Angela suddenly felt the room sway and she took a deep breath to steady herself.

"My dear ladies, do come in and be seated beside this fine fire," he said

charmingly.

Out of the corner of her eye, Angela glimpsed another man. He was almost a replica of Sir Damien, but his hair was of a burnished gold.

Sir Damien waited until the women settled and their maidservants seated in full view beside the door, before waving the other man forward.

"My Lady Angela and Lady Lilly, may I present my brother, Sir Robert de Anesi."

Sir Robert stepped forward, bowed, and took Angela's hand. He smiled warmly and brushed his lips across her knuckles. His eyes were the exact same deep violet blue as Sir Damien's.

"'Tis a pleasure to meet you, Sir Robert," Angela replied.

Robert released her and turned to take Lilly's hand. He gazed into her eyes.

"Lady Lilly, I am a man of considerable wealth. I speak your language quite well, and I will honor your English traditions. I will be privileged if you will accept me as your betrothed," he stated in almost perfect English.

Lilly blushed and fluttered her eyes. "Sir Robert, I find your proposal most satisfactory."

Sir Damien handed out goblets of wine then offered up a toast. Afterward, he sat gazing at Angela with such intensity she felt as if she were naked. His eyes smoldered as he discussed the weather and other general topics. Sir Robert rose suddenly and took a seat beside Lilly. They began to discuss her estate, and her wishes regarding their wedding. Sir Robert was most insistent they take their vows within the next sennight.

Angela slowly got to her feet and both men rose as she boldly took a seat beside Sir Damien. He moved so close his leather-clad leg touched hers and the intense heat from his body penetrated her thin dress. He spoke to her softly in French, but she found his presence so overwhelming she could hardly answer in more than two syllables.

"Lady Angela, do you play chess?"

Angela nodded, her eyes never leaving his face. "Yes, milord, I am quite accomplished at that game."

He chuckled softly. "As am I, but you must allow me to teach you Merelles. 'Tis a good game to wile away the dark winter nights when one is not otherwise occupied." He gave her a saucy wink.

Angela flushed but she could not lower her eyes. She sipped her wine and smiled coyly. He was a whirlpool of sin pulling her toward him.

"My father was going to tutor me in the art of falconry. I believe the falcons of Parr Manor are the finest in the country," she said.

Sir Damien's eyes flashed in amusement. "I will introduce you to my own. Indeed, on the morrow after training I would be honored if you and Lady Lilly would come and watch while my brother and I put our falcons through their paces."

Angela smiled warmly. "I am sure that can be arranged. Where shall we meet, my lord?"

Sir Damien suddenly stood and offered his arm. "Come. I will show you from the battlements."

Angela motioned to her maidservant to remain in her seat. She placed trembling fingers lightly on his arm and allowed him to escort her out of the solar, down a long corridor, and then up a set of stone steps to the deserted battlements at the top of the keep. He stood and pointed to the training field beyond the bailey.

"You may come and watch me train, and afterward I will instruct you in the art of falconry. A most proper pursuit, do you not agree?" He slipped an arm around her waist and pulled her against his hard body.

"My maid," Angela whispered frantically.

"She will see nothing! My dearest Lady Angela, how delightful you look this day. Have you not craved my kiss as I have yours?" he whispered, trailing kisses from her cheek to her neck and back. He nipped a trail along her jaw before claiming her lips in gentle persuasion.

Angela clung to him. She boldly snaked her hands up his broad chest and around his neck. His long, silky hair brushed the back of her hands. A moan of forbidden delight escaped her lips when his broad hands cupped her breasts and his calloused thumbs raked deliciously across her swollen nipples. She moaned as his knee pushed between her thighs, touching her core. Her head fell back as the breath

rushed from her lungs. He kissed her throat and swirled his tongue along the edge of her neckline and loosened her laces. Her breasts swelled at his touch, and she longed to feel his lips against her nipples. Instinctively, she pushed her hands into his hair and held his head close to her breast. He smiled and lifted first one breast and then the other from her gown. Cupping one, he suckled it gently.

Angela blocked all thoughts of being discovered from her mind. Nothing mattered but prolonging this delectable moment and she melted beneath his experienced touch. He played her body like a lute, his fingers strumming deep, sensual music from every part of her being.

Damien pulled away and placed his forehead against hers, his eyes deep pools of passion. He was breathing heavily.

"I have an audience with the king this eve. God willing, he will give his blessing to our betrothal, for in truth I ache for you, my lady."

"As do I for you, Sir Damien. I admit I was much afraid this morning when Lady Lilly proclaimed the king had betrothed her to Lord de Anesi. I thought mayhap you'd changed your mind."

Sir Damien pushed a stray hair behind her ear and trailed his finger down her cheek. "Fear not, Lady Angela, *my* angel, for I will have no other. This is my pledge to you here under God's heaven."

Angela looked up into his honest face. "As I pledge myself to you, Sir Damien. I swear before God I shall accept no other." She lifted her hands to cup his face. He turned his head and kissed her palm.

Damien looked at her flushed face and swollen lips. He could smell her arousal and it made him ache. His hard cock throbbed with need. He could not conceal his obvious desire for the lady and he slipped his hand around her waist.

"Mayhap we need a little time to recover before we return to the solar; I would suggest, perhaps, that you allow me to straighten your head rail?"

Angela smiled broadly as he tucked in her hair and straightened her gown, retying her laces.

"Mayhap, Sir Damien, we should stand apart and take in the splendid view of

the castle grounds?"

They stood on there together for some time, until they heard footsteps coming up the steps and Sir Robert stepped out onto the battlements.

"Here you are," he said. "Lady Angela, Lady Lilly is asking after you. She is ready to retire."

Sir Damien grinned sheepishly at Angela. "We should go inside, my lady. Mayhap on the morrow we too will be planning our wedding."

Chapter Three

King William sat dozing before the fire in the Great Chamber, a thick red blanket across his knees. When the footman announced Damien, he lifted his head and beckoned him forward.

"Sir Damien, were it not for the fact that your father is one of my closest friends I would not have allowed this intrusion. Now pray tell why do you disturb me?"

Damien bowed low and tried with some difficulty to quell his enthusiasm. "Your Majesty, I have come to request the hand of the Lady Angela of Parr."

William sighed deeply. "Is this all I hear from my men this day? Is God punishing me with this constant repetitive drivel? Pray tell why you think you are worthy of this prize, for indeed my choice for this lady is Lord Bruin."

Damien drew himself up to his full impressive height. This news was disastrous, and most likely irreversible. Lord Bruin was an old and trusted friend of the king. It would be most difficult to change his mind.

"It is your wish, Sire, that we Normans spread our seed across this England. Lord Bruin is old and mayhap will not see his heir's sixth birthday. This would leave you without a trusted lord in this most important area. I am young as is the Lady Angela and we will have many years to produce sons to serve your Highness."

The king rubbed his chin, thoughtfully. "This may be so, but I gave my word that Lord Bruin may have his choice and he selected the Lady Angela. He fancies the west coast and her estate would thrive under his direction. Her manor is great and

would require a large compliment of soldiers and surfs to extract the taxes I require. You have no troops save your Saxon squire . . . hardly a good recommendation for such a prize. The Lady Angela is fluent in French and Bruin is too set in his ways to learn English. She is young and compliant, which is to his taste."

"Sire, I must disagree, as during the betrothal of Lady Lilly to my brother I had the pleasure of much conversation with the lady. I must inform you the Lady Angela is willful and high-spirited. "

The king rolled his eyes and grunted. "You would have me believe you find this desirable in a wife?"

Damien opened his arms wide. "We have much in common and, and yes, Sire, I do enjoy a spirited woman."

"No matter; my mind is set. If need be, Bruin will beat her into compliance."

The king waved Damien away and he backed from the room. Anger, followed quickly by despair, roared into his chest. Lord Bruin de Marselaise was nine and forty, with a large, overhanging gut. He smelled foul and had a domineering temperament. He'd lost three wives under unusual circumstances and had no heir. A ruthless, depraved man, he enjoyed battle; raping and pillaging was his devotion. He flaunted his mistress at court and forever had a young, impressionable wench ensconced in his bedchamber. Damien stopped in the drafty hallway, ran both hands through his hair and stared at the blank walls. He could not, would not see his sweet angel wed to such a despicable old man.

Damien wrestled with the need to run to Angela and bury his face in her fragrant hair. His heart was an open wound. Gasping in despair, he reeled back against the cold wall in deep, consuming pain. He had waited so long to take a wife. These past seven years with King William had been uncertain, and he'd given no thought to love. Indeed, the very fact he had even survived the many battles was a miracle. He had witnessed so much bloodshed, had sought God's forgiveness countless times for the brave men he had so willingly dispatched. All this madness endured for one reason; his fierce loyalty to his king. And what did he get in return? A heartless denial of the one favor he'd dared to ask. To find a woman such as Lady Angela, to have her return his affection with such passion and then see her given to

another. It was unbearable.

* * * * *

Meg's frowning face loomed over Angela as she roused her from sleep. "Milady, a messenger awaits you; he says his message is for your ears only."

Meg helped Angela don a cloak and pushed slippers onto her feet. She hastened to the door and peered curiously out. The young man standing before her was familiar. He was Sir Damien's squire. He held up a piece of hay and delivered his message, his eyes wide and anxious.

"Lady Angela, my master has grave news. Please hasten to the ladies' solar." He bowed low before scampering off down the passageway.

Angela turned and shut the door. "Put on your cloak, Meg; we must go immediately."

"But milady, meeting a man at this time of night is dangerous. Have you lost your wits? What would your dear father think of you running to do a Norman's bidding in the middle of the night? You must think of your reputation. No man will look upon you with kindness if you are compromised."

Angela lifted her chin and stepped forward. "How dare you insinuate such a thing? Mayhap I have already found my betrothed. Now stop with your nonsense. We need to hurry."

Angela wasted no time. She rushed along the deserted passageways, clasping her ample cloak tightly around her linen shift. Sir Damien's squire waited outside the ladies' solar and she ordered Meg to wait with him. She pushed the door open to find Damien bent over the fireplace, holding the mantelpiece with both hands, staring down into the cooling embers.

"Sir Damien?"

He turned around quickly and walked toward her. He swept her into his arms, crushing her lips with his. Angela pulled away and stared up at his ashen face. His eyes displayed deep grief.

"What has happened?" she said, quietly stroking his hair.

He slowly shook his head. "The king has promised you to Lord Bruin, an old knight of nine and forty. I tried to change his mind, but he would have none of it."

Angela fell limp in his arms and buried her face in the crook of his neck. She inhaled his musky scent as tears welled up in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. He held her close and murmured sweet words of love into her ear until she lifted her tear-stained face to his.

"Love me, Sir Damien, here and now. For as God knows, my heart is yours. I will take myself to a convent before I marry another. *Please*, I beg you; give me this one memory, for I swear I will have no other."

"You have offered me a gift only offered to a husband on the night of their nuptials. Are you certain, my sweet angel?"

"It is only *you* I desire, Sir Damien. Mayhap in time you will find a way to resolve this frightful mess."

"Oh lady, I give you my oath I will not rest until we are together. I want you for my wife. We have known each other but a few days but I know you feel the same connection I do. I believe I've fallen in love with you, my sweet angel."

Damien kissed her wet cheeks then stepped away. He went to the door and nodded to his squire before turning to Meg.

"Do not allow anyone to enter this chamber, and *you*, madam, if you value your mistress's life you will keep silent."

He closed the door then quickly crossed the room. He wrapped his arms around Angela and backed her against the wall.

Angela's heart raced as he scattered sweet kisses along her chin. His hot tongue licked her earlobe before he slowly nibbled her bottom lip. He lifted his head, his eyes locked on hers and he kissed her deeply, intensely. His warm, heady scent filled her nostrils, sending delightful vibrations fluttering deep in her belly. Angela felt no fear, no regrets when he removed her cloak. Her body responded instinctively to his touch. She arched her back and pushed her aching breasts toward him. She writhed in forbidden ecstasy as he cupped them with warm hands and circled his calloused thumbs over her sensitive nipples. He tormented, he teased,

and he bent his head and licked a circle around one hard bud and then the other, drawing wet circles on her linen shift. His breath was so hot that when he lifted his head they cooled unbearably, rising to hard tight peaks.

She let out a short gasp as a warm hand ran up her leg, lifting her shift in the process. He clasped her bare bottom, easing her up onto his leather-clad thigh. She squirmed in pleasure as her legs parted and her slick, wet folds met his hard, cold knee. He took her mouth again, and as their tongues danced, he rocked her gently back and forth along his strong muscular thigh. Angela swooned at the exquisite sensations flooding her body, delighting in the forbidden heat strumming through her most intimate parts. Damien growled deep in his chest as he lifted her into his arms. He carried her across the room and lowered her onto the mat before the fire. He pulled her shift up and over her head, tossing it to the floor, and then stood back to admire her nakedness. Angela felt suddenly embarrassed and heat flooded her cheeks as Damien smiled.

"You are so beautiful, milady. I will keep this image in my mind forever," he said as he began to remove his tunic and breeches. Moments later, he was as naked as she was.

Damien could only stand before her motionless. His prowess with women deserted him as he absorbed her splendor. Doubt flooded his mind and he stilled like a statue. She held his gaze, her eyes filled with trust. How could he think to deflower her? Was his mind inflamed with fever? This was the first woman who had ever mattered to him. He owed her his love, not a covering like a common whore..

But when Angela's gaze traveled down to his aching hard cock then back up to his face, all his misgivings fled. He nearly spilled his seed as their eyes locked and her teeth closed seductively on her bottom lip.

He discovered he could not blink as she casually reached behind her head to release a cascade of hair that tumbled like black silk across the floor. Her large, ivory breasts with their enticingly erect rose-pink nipples mesmerized him. His gaze drifted across her pure white skin to her softly rounded belly. His mouth went dry as he glimpsed the stark triangle of damp, dark curls nestled between her open

thighs. She was beautiful and in this moment she was his and his alone.

He was lost.

Kneeling carefully between her legs, he leaned over her, supporting himself on his forearms. He kissed a slow, wet trail up her belly to the valley between her breasts. He kissed each white mound then lazily circled his tongue around each pink bud before gently suckling one and then the other. Angela began mewling and arching her back as he continued to torment her nipples, raking them with his teeth until they stood up, deep red and erect.

"Sir Damien, *please* . . . it is too good. I fear I cannot stand such pleasure," she gasped.

Damien rose above her and kissed the tip of her nose.

"Do you want me to stop, my sweet angel?" He brushed a lock of damp hair from her flushed face and tenderly kissed her neck.

Angela shook her head. "No, please continue."

Damien chuckled and lashed his tongue across her sensitive nipples. Dear Lord, she tasted like honey, so sweet. He fought for control, desperate to ensure his lovemaking remain gentle for her first time. Consumed with lust, he longed to bury himself deep within her and ride her hard to completion. He slipped his hand down to her quivering belly and let it rest there a while before slipping his fingers between her open thighs. He felt her tense at his touch.

"Oh sweet angel," he whispered, "relax and allow yourself to enjoy."

She was so very wet and his fingers glistened with her moisture as he tenderly probed her folds. Slipping a finger inside, he prodded gently. So hot, so tight. He found her pearl with his thumb, and circled it slowly. He wanted so to taste her, to drink her virgin honey, to suck her swollen pearl until she screamed out his name in passion. Her small hands slid down his back and held him tightly, her breath coming in short pants. He continued swirling his fingers and suckling her tender buds until she cried out and arched against him, trembling in ecstatic completion. He muffled her cries of pleasure with a kiss. He was well pleased when she pushed her hands through his hair and returned his kiss with passion.

"I want to taste you, to feel you tremble against my mouth," he said as he

grasped her rounded bottom with both hands and lifted her soaking folds to his lips.

He felt her tense for a second before her fingers twirled in his hair and she moaned her approval. He drove his tongue deep inside, probing and swirling as she writhed in his hands. She tasted so sweet, and her nectar ran down his chin as he lapped. He found her hard pearl and sucked, holding her firmly until her whole body shuddered to conclusion.

He inhaled her sweet lavender perfume mingled with the heady scent of her deep arousal until he was giddy. He leaned back, grasped his throbbing cock and rubbed the glistening head slowly against her swollen folds. She was so very hot, so wet. She bucked at the contact, lifting her hips to meet him. She grasped his shoulders and pulled him down toward her. Panting, she had her eyes screwed shut.

“Look at me, Angela. Know that it is I, Sir Damien de Anesi, who accepts your most precious gift.”

As she opened her sultry eyes he pitched forward, driving into her hot depths, gasping at her tightness.

Angela let out a small cry then sighed deeply and smiled up at him. Damien stemmed his rampant desire and remained motionless, embedded deep within her sweet, wet heat. He kissed her gently and waited until she relaxed before he dared move. He then withdrew completely and drove back into her tight channel, watching her face intently. She was magnificent and held his shoulders, murmuring words of encouragement as he thrust and withdrew, thrust and withdrew. They rode together in perfect harmony, and she lifted her legs to encircle his waist and molded her body to his. He deepened his thrusts into her slick heat, biting the inside of his cheek to keep control. She began to contract around his cock, milking him delightfully with her internal muscles. Damien could hold back no more and with one last hard plunge he fell off the precipice and exploded deep inside her.

He lay there supporting his weight on his hands, his cock buried deep as he nibbled and teased her lips. The deep emotion that surged through him was unnerving. He had bedded many women, but none had brought this intense reaction. He raised his eyes and met hers and found wet pools of unspent tears. His stomach turned and such profound grief gripped him that tears pricked the back of

his eyes.

"Lady Angela, sweet angel, please I beg you no tears. Remember our joy this night until we can be together once more."

Angela nodded and smiled bravely. "I was told that what we have enjoyed was an act most wives treat with disdain. Is it love that makes it so delightful?"

"Sweet angel, you are correct. Our love makes this so, and I promise we will enjoy each other again soon. It pains me greatly to send you back to your bed to sleep alone, milady. After such a wondrous union we should lie in each other's arms, not flee into the night. There must be a way to resolve this disaster; I will find a solution, I promise you."

Damien kissed her tenderly before withdrawing and slowly standing. He moved to a table against the wall, poured water into a washing bowl and cleansed himself. He returned with a wet cloth and washed her gently. He met her smoldering gaze, and she reached for him, slipping a hand around to grip the cheek of his buttocks.

"My lady, it may hurt you to engage again so soon." But even as he said the words, his cock stirred at her wondrous invitation and he groaned.

She sat up slowly. Firelight danced across her glorious body and reflected in her eyes as she looked up into his face.

"You have explored my body. May I, my dearest Damien, not do the same to you?" She pushed a knee between his legs to widen his stance.

Damien's knees trembled as her long fingers caressed his buttocks. He bit his bottom lip as she sensuously caressed the crack from top to bottom then explored his tight hole. Her face was so tantalizingly close to his cock he could feel the warmth of her breath.

Damien slid his hands into her long, raven hair as she trailed her tongue slowly up his thigh, stopping in agonizing torment at his balls. She blew on the wet trail and his cock swelled and began to throb. Her tongue flicked out tentatively and she began to lick his balls, gently sucking the wrinkled skin. Blood rushed into his cock with such force that his head began to spin and the moan that escaped her lips made him shudder in rapture.

Angela felt him tremble under her touch. The musky taste of him filled her mouth, inflaming her. His thick cock bobbed in her face. It nestled in a mass of gold curls and rose thick and long to an engorged purple head. The inviting red slit glistened with a single drop of moisture. She raised her head and licked slowly upward from the base to the thick top and paused. Damien groaned and shuddered, grasping her hair with clenched fists.

“Dear lady, please continue; this pleases me immensely.” He urged her, rubbing her cheeks with his thumbs.

Angela tasted the droplets of moisture collecting along the red slit. He tasted so delicious, salty-hot; she could not resist sucking him deeply into her mouth. She heard his gasp as she let him slide from between her lips. She wet the fingers of one hand, grasped his shaft and then took him deeply into her throat.

Damien watched her in total amazement. His head spun as she sucked his aching cock into her hot, wet mouth. She was delightfully inexperienced as she bobbed her head, grazing him tantalizingly against her teeth. Did she know what was to come? Mayhap he would ruin her lust for this exquisite love play. He gritted his teeth, wanting this joy to last forever.

She paused, licked the fingers of her other hand, then took him back into her mouth. As she continued sucking him, her wet fingers inched up the crack of his buttocks and he instinctively opened his legs wider to give her access. Sweet Jesus, she’d somehow guessed his secret compulsion. Her index finger swirled and then probed his tight, puckered hole. His breath became ragged as she pushed her finger in up to the knuckle and began to fuck him slowly. It was as if she knew instinctively what he craved. He wanted to scream out in delirium when she fucked his hole to the rhythmic sucking of his engorged cock. Her mouth was hot, luscious and so very wet. Her finger ground into him, thrilling, exciting and awakening a dark, voracious need.

Angela could feel his desire deep within her core. Her folds dripped with

moisture and her hard pearl throbbed. She could feel him growing, pulsating, and filling her mouth completely. His flesh burned against her bare breasts, his hands in her hair held her tightly. She wanted to taste his seed, feel his heat spill on her tongue and flow down her throat. She withdrew her finger from his hole and then plunged two deep within. His breath came in short pants and his grip tightened. He called out her name and shuddered as his hot, salty seed filled her mouth and trickled down her chin. She swooned at the taste of him, and the seduction of his pulsing cock continued on her tongue. He held her fast, rocking slowly as she savored his intoxicating elixir. She slowly removed her fingers. He was still firm in her mouth and she licked him clean, savoring every musky drop.

He fell to his knees and drew her to him in a devastating kiss. He devoured her lips and plunged his tongue deep into her mouth. His lips trailed her chin as his hand trailed down her body and sunk between her soaking folds. He quickly found her swollen pearl and pinched it hard between his fingers. His lips returned to her mouth savagely as the hunger raged frenziedly through her body. He controlled her with every enticing touch, with every euphoric kiss. She could feel his mouth rise at the corners in a smile as exquisite waves of pleasure rolled through her body.

He held her then, so tenderly against his sweat-coated body. The fire was no more than glowing embers in the grate, the candles long extinguished. His hand caressed her sore nipples and his soft mouth traced kisses along her jaw.

"I love you, Lady Angela. Fear not. I will find a way to see you again very soon. But for now, it is late and you must return to your room." He slipped off the sofa and got to his feet.

Holding her gaze, he slowly dressed. She sat up, pulled on her shift then wrapped her cloak around her shoulders.

"Shall I go with Lady Lilly tomorrow to watch you train? Will you still teach me how to fly a falcon?"

Damien ran his hands through his hair then sat down next to her, taking her small hands in his. "Yes, we are to be chaperones for my brother and Lady Lilly so it will certainly not appear suspicious."

"Is there anyone you may ask to intercede on our behalf to change the king's

mind?"

Damien rose, helped her to her feet, and held her close.

"I will confide in my brother; he may have a solution. Now, my love, return to your room and it would be best to wash your cloak as soon as possible."

Angela stood up on the tips of her toes and kissed him on the lips. She turned and opened the door. With a nod to Meg, she turned and marched along the corridor, head held high. She passed no one, entered her room, and flung off her cloak.

"Wash that now; I spilt wine on it."

"Now, milady? It is past midnight."

"This minute. It will take some time to dry and I need it, so hurry now."

Angela slipped beneath the counterpane. Her body quivered with pleasure. Damien's scent clung to her body, and she reveled in it. A secretive smile crept across her lips as she relived every tender moment in her mind. Her body still tingled from his caress. She moaned softly as Damien's face crossed her mind and her cheeks heated at the memory of his intimate touch. She sighed, drifting into a deep sleep, both arms wrapped around her bolster.

Chapter Four

Damien returned to his room. Fully dressed, he flung himself across his massive bed. Byron, his squire, pulled off his boots and threw a quilt over him before slipping silently from the room.

Sleep came easily, but a few hours later Damien awoke gripped by fear. Night terrors of Lady Angela, crushed beneath the Bruin's huge bulk, interrupted his sleep. He sat up in the darkness, rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands, and stared into the blackness. Reality closed in upon him, filling him with despair. How could he think to challenge the king's decision? It would be treason to do so and William was not a king to be lenient with any dissenters. Indeed, he had beheaded all who had dared to question him. Mayhap he could anger Lord Bruin and goad him into a

challenge with Lady Angela as a prize? The old man was a formidable swordsman, but Damien was a battle-hardened knight. He was convinced that with the added strength of youth he would prevail. He stripped off his clothes, tossed them to the floor, and slid between the quilts. At least he had a plan worth discussing with Robert on the morrow.

* * * * *

The following morn the Great Hall hummed with male voices as the knights broke their fast with loaves of hot fresh bread, preserves, and cheese. This week, the walls displayed each knight's personal standard, flying proudly atop long poles. Below each standard sat a shield emblazoned with their family's coat of arms. The knights filled the hall to capacity. They were anxious to continue their training for the yearly King's Tournament, to be held at the beginning of the following week. All of the knights, from low-born to noblemen, had entered the list that included jousting and hand-to-hand combat with axe or sword. King William was secretive about the prize for this year's winner. Many believed he would be offering the victorious knight the hand of a selected Saxon noblewoman and her vast lands.

Damien discussed his concerns with Robert. His brother turned in his seat and inclined his head.

"Father will be here on the morrow. He is delighted that I have found a wife. He will listen to all you tell him and will give you the sound advice you require. It is unfortunate you are in this position but being rash will not endear you to the king."

Damien flashed him a black look.

"For God's sake, Damien," Robert said, grasping his shoulder, "no good will come from challenging Lord Bruin. He will no doubt use a proxy. It has been three years since we have done anything more than joust. Methinks you should train in earnest if you have no other plan."

Damien shook off Robert's hand. He leaned toward him, and hissed low between his teeth. "I took her maidenhead last eve. We pledged our troth to each other before God. I will suffer any fate that befalls me to take her to wife. She in turn

has promised me she will disappear into a convent rather than wed Lord Bruin. *Now* tell me not to be rash. For God's sake, Robert, she may be with child."

Robert met his eyes with compassion. "By the stars, I had no idea this was more than a passing fancy. You are in love so soon?"

"So it would seem, although these feelings are foreign to me. Indeed, I feel as if I am dying from some deep wound to the heart, rather than the delight our bards write of so colorfully. In truth, I would have likely avoided such a disastrous position had I not believed the king would have given us his blessing. He did, after all, promise we would all gain a wife and land if we fought at his side. A part of me died when he refused my request for the Lady Angela. I am sorry to admit that another part shriveled for the loss of faith in the word of my liege. I know it was rash to bed her, indeed treasonous, but she begged me and I could not refuse."

"Methinks your loins rule your head, brother. It was foolish to agree to such when you knew she was promised to another. No doubt before this insanity the king would have given you any other lady of your choice. You are damned, Damien, whichever way you lean in this matter. You may die facing Lord Bruin's proxy or by the king's axe if he discovers your treason. Let me think on this dilemma. I know God looks favorably upon those in love and methinks He will send us a favorable solution."

"Challenging Lord Bruin or his proxy holds little fear for me. I *am* concerned that if I fail, our father will believe I have dishonored the family name. Beware, brother, for this malady they call *love* is a strange madness. The Lady Angela fills my every thought and 'tis not just my loins that ache but my very soul cries out in desperate need to hold her close. I *know* I shall not survive without her. I will welcome death if she is taken from me."

* * * * *

Angela bathed in the wide river that flowed beside the castle. She watched Meg with amusement. Her maidservant's head turned nervously from side to side as she watched for movement in the bushes. Meg had said nothing about her mistress's

time with Sir Damien or of washing the damning evidence from her soiled cloak.

When she'd dressed this morning, Angela's tender nipples had rubbed against her shift. Indeed, her body ached in unfamiliar places and the cold water soothed them nicely. She climbed up the riverbank then rubbed bunches of dried lavender over her tender skin. Meg rushed forward and helped her into a gown and cloak.

The way was clear as they hurried back through the bailey. As they scurried along the passageway, Angela's wet hair sent rivulets of cold water down her back. She stopped in mid-stride as Sir Damien and Sir Robert strode out of the Great Hall. Sir Robert bowed and continued on his way, but Sir Damien stopped, a strange, twisted smile on his face. Angela's heart raced and her legs nearly buckled as his hooded, smoldering gaze drifted over her.

"Good morning, Lady Angela. It would seem by your current state that the rains have returned. Pity, I was so looking forward to showing off my prized falcon," he said, taking her offered hand and brushing her knuckles with his lips.

He glanced at Meg. "Do you understand me, madam?"

Meg looked at Angela and cocked her head. "What does he say?"

"Sir Damien asked why you allow me to walk around soaking wet," said Angela.

"I am relieved to see that my angel is in good health this morn," he said, looking at Angela with a fierce intensity.

"Though she does not understand your language, my maid will note your demeanor; beware or we will be undone, sir." She quickly looked away.

Sir Damien turned to Meg and addressed her in French. "I wish with all my heart that I could take your beautiful mistress to my bed, suckle her rosy nipples until she begs me to stop, and make love to her forever. However, a stolen kiss would suffice; perhaps we could meet on the battlements after the midday meal?"

Angela flushed, desire fluttering her stomach and a noticeable wetness forming between her legs. Meg looked from Damien to Angela.

"I would imagine Sir Damien is chastising me for allowing you to walk around with wet hair. Fear not, mistress; I will soon have you back to normal.

Mayhap you should tell him that," she exclaimed indignantly.

Angela turned to face Damien, who wore a satisfied smile.

"I will welcome your kiss, Sir Damien. Mayhap you should think on a better place, for I have a deep ache that only your touch may cure." She defiantly met his gaze.

Damien released a deep breath that whistled out between his teeth.

"I will do as you suggest, my lady." He straightened his back, turned on his heel and marched toward the bailey.

A guard stopped Angela and Meg as they neared their sleeping chamber.. He informed them by order of the king they were to move into another area of the castle. He said her new room was very comfortable, with a large bedchamber and a separate room for her maidservant. Angela followed him to an opulent chamber on the other side of the keep. She entered with some concern that quickly turned to fear as she stepped inside. A large, elderly man stood in the center of the room, exuding a heavy smell of sweat and rotten eggs. Large spots of spilled food covered the front of his costly tunic, and filth caked the sleeves.

He cast his gaze over Angela and licked his thick red lips.

"Am I betrothed to a drowned foundling?" he bellowed.

Angela pulled her cloak tightly around her and lifted her chin in defiance. "I am afraid you are in error, sir. I am Lady Angela of Parr, and the king has not asked me if I would accept a proposal."

"King William does not offer proposals, wench, and he certainly does not need your permission. He may give you to whomever he chooses and he gave you and all your lands to *me*. I am Lord Bruin. These rooms will serve us well. We will be married two days hence. After the tournament, I will take my seat as the lord of your manor. Now come here so I may taste your lips." He grasped her arm and dragged her into his embrace.

Angela pushed hard against his chest. "I will do no such thing; I have only your word this is so. Unhand me, sir, before I call the guards."

"The good king informed me you were willful, but no matter. 'Tis nothing

that a good beating won't fix. I will enjoy teaching you respect on our wedding night and every night for the rest of your days." He promised, dropping her arm harshly and storming from the room. Angela sunk against the cold wall, one hand clasped against her mouth as Meg rushed to her side.

"Who was that man, milady?"

"That is my betrothed, my *gift* from the king for my service." She sobbed as Meg rushed past her. She pushed the heavy door closed and turned the key in the lock.

* * * * *

Damien swung his sword in both hands, lifting it high into the air before bringing it down in a sickening crash on his opponent's blade. Sweat beaded on his brow. He had spun and ducked for more than an hour, meeting every blow that rained down relentlessly upon him. His shoulders and back burned as he pushed his body to its limit. In his mind, every blow he landed was inflicted against Lord Bruin.

"Hold." Robert called out.

Damien dropped his sword and bowed toward Sir Philip, his opponent.

Sir Philip removed his battered helm. He shook his head, wiping the sweat from his reddened face.

"I would hope we are not matched on the list. You are my friend, but today I felt as if I were fighting for my life."

Robert watched in some amusement as Sir Phillip staggered toward his squire.

"You would do well to cease now and cool your sweat. See yonder, Lady Lilly and Lady Angela await us." He indicated the two women with a tip of his head as he tossed a piece of fresh linen to his brother.

The training field was a hive of activity. The knights trained with swords or axes, some holding their lances high as they rode spirited horses purposely toward the quintain. The aroma of horse and the musky scent of men hung heavy in the damp air.

Angela walked with her hands clasped together to avoid Lilly noticing her trembling fingers. She was shattered, the reality of her betrothal weighing upon her shoulders like a death sentence. She scanned every inch of the training field in search of Damien. She held her breath when she glimpsed Sir Robert standing, hands on hips, observing a tall, broad knight dressed in black. Long blond hair cascaded from his silver helm as he slipped his sword into the scabbard at his waist. *Damien*. She would know him anywhere, even covered in armor.

"Look there is Sir Robert." Lilly exclaimed, lifting her skirts and stepping delicately between the horse droppings and pools of mud.

Angela froze to the spot as Damien removed his helm, threw it to his squire, and began to wipe the sweat from his face and arms. He lifted his eyes to meet hers and she melted inside. Tears stung the back of her eyes and she stifled a sob.

Sir Robert headed in their direction. Damien waited for his squire to collect a wine skin. He drank his fill before removing his wet tunic and wiping down his muscled body.

Angela screamed in fright as a massive brown horse thundered up beside her and a fat gloved fist grasped her shoulder. She turned, horrified to see Lord Bruin glaring down at her. His eyes, visible through the slit in his helm, looked like those of a ferocious pig. He bellowed so loud she almost collapsed with shock.

"Why do you stand here looking lustfully at that shirtless knight; are you a whore?"

Meg rushed to her side and gripped her arm in support as Angela shook her head firmly in denial.

"I am a chaperone to the Lady Lilly for a falconry demonstration by the king's request. As you must have noticed, I remained here when the knight removed his shirt and I averted my eyes. Your accusation is groundless, sir."

Sir Robert stepped to her side with Lilly on his arm. He lifted his head and stared stonily at Lord Bruin.

"I do believe congratulations are in order, Lord Bruin?" he stated flatly, his eyes as cold as ice.

Angela stepped away from the horse and stood beside Lilly. Lord Bruin spat

on the ground, spun his horse around, and raced away, his large belly flapping against the pommel of his saddle.

Angela noted the compassion in Sir Robert's eyes as he asked after her well being. Then he turned to Lilly, who stood round-eyed in astonishment.

"Would seem Lord Bruin is overwhelmed by his good fortune," declared Sir Robert sourly before leading them all through the postern gate and out to a field where the king's falconer stood waiting.

* * * * *

Damien pulled on a clean shirt then took another long drink from the wine skin. It had taken a supreme effort to turn away from Lady Angela's frightened face. Instinct told him to mount his horse, chase down Lord Bruin, and run him through with his sword. Never had he backed down from a fight, never before had he not fought for the right of a matter, or for honor. Byron had beseeched him to remain calm. It had taken every ounce of his strength to do so as the brute manhandled *his* woman.

"You are nothing better than a coward. You do not deserve the honor of being a knight, for no knight would act with such disregard to chivalry," he spat, loudly chastising himself as he walked slowly toward the postern gate.

Byron walked to his side, his young face crinkled in a deep frown. "May I speak freely, my lord?"

Damien gave him a sharp nod. He stared straight ahead and continued to walk, taking long swallows from the wine skin every few paces.

"I am aware of your discomfort, my lord. It took great courage to remain silent and your act without doubt saved the Lady Angela from far worse disrespect."

Damien snorted. He stopped and looked down at his squire with disdain, one hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

Byron took a deep breath and continued.

"I may have a plan of sorts. I have information that Lord Bruin plans to wed two days hence. It would enrage him if the Lady Angela refuses to pledge her troth

to him at the altar. She could beg to be secured in the oratory for safety. I could have a horse waiting outside, ready for her escape. I could escort her to the convent; it is but a short ride from here. It would only require that you and Sir Robert cause a distraction. This plan may give you some time to resolve this injustice."

Damien placed a hand on Byron's shoulder. "You are correct, good squire. My mind has been on the safety of the Lady Angela, not on the problem at hand. Love has weakened me, but no more. We shall get my lady to safety and then I will deal with Lord Bruin, but not a word of this to anyone else, Byron. My lady's life depends upon it."

* * * * *

Angela stood quietly beside Meg as Sir Robert introduced Lilly to the rudiments of falconry. Lilly appeared to fear the bird and refused to allow Sir Robert to remove its hood.

Damien strolled casually toward them, a wine skin hanging from one hand. He appeared pale but calm. He handed the wine skin to his squire then sauntered nonchalantly toward a perch some twenty paces away.

"If you would stand here with me, my lady, I will endeavor to instruct you in the fine art of falconry."

Angela lifted her chin and strolled toward him.

"Speak softly and you will gain the bird's respect," he said, wrapping a thick leather sleeve on Angela's right forearm and tying it tightly before fitting his own.

He removed the magnificent bird's cap and it let out a squawk before fluttering onto Damien's arm. Its talons were long and dangerous, its beak sharp and deadly. The bird tilted his head and looked toward Angela.

"He is a beauty; what do you call him?" she asked softly.

Damien threw the bird into the sky and watched as it circled the oval.

"No name but falcon. Come stand before me and hold your arm out to the side." He stood behind her and pulled her close.

Damien placed his arm below hers to support the weight of the bird when it

landed. He bent his head and whispered close to her ear, his breath hot on her cheek. "I will *kill* him for touching you. However, although it pains me, I must wait until the time is right. To act rashly will endanger your life, but fear, not; I have an idea."

Angela listened in silence as Damien unfolded his plan. She tilted her head up and watched the bird circle above, waiting for the command to land.

"Do you ride?" he asked.

"No, but no matter, how difficult can it be?" she replied softly.

"Dear God, I will fear for your safety," he gasped.

Angela turned her head indignantly. "I am stronger than you believe, Sir Damien. Did you not know that after my father perished at Hastings, I managed my estates completely alone? These past three years I have achieved success in many things usually left to menfolk, so please do not worry."

Damien lifted his fingers to his lips and whistled loudly. The bird flew in a wide circle then dived. It landed heavily on Angela's arm. The experience of having such a wild creature so close exhilarated her. When the bird settled, Damien stepped away. He called to the bird and it fluttered to his arm. He returned it to its perch and his squire gave it a piece of raw meat.

"I have been moved to a new chamber," Angela said. "It is directly below the ladies' solar. Lord Bruin was there when I arrived. The awful man tried to kiss me and informed me we are to be wed two days hence."

Damien inclined his head toward his squire and surprised Angela by speaking in English.

"May I introduce, Byron, my squire? He will accompany you to the convent and hopefully return before they find you have escaped."

Byron stepped away from the bird and bowed respectfully but said nothing.

Damien continued in French. "He will relay messages between us using your maid. He cannot be seen addressing you personally or it will arouse Lord Bruin's suspicion."

Angela lowered her eyes as fear threatened to undo her. "In truth, I am very frightened of that man. What will I do if my escape from the chapel is thwarted? Can he force me to pledge my troth?"

Damien placed a hand on her arm and began to untie the leather sleeve. His eyes reflected his sorrow when he lifted them to meet hers.

“Not while I live, lady.”

Chapter Five

Angela paced the bedchamber, her hands balled at her hips. Her gaze drifted furtively from her bed to a carved wooden box on the dresser. The message delivered most eloquently from a young Norman page had been most explicit and from no less than the king himself. This eve she was to dine at the king's table with her betrothed. She was to dress in the exquisite blue gown and slippers that Meg had placed on her bed. She was to wear the Bruin sapphire around her neck. Grasping her throat, Angela fought to breathe at the very thought of wearing the monstrosity. The heavy gold necklace was a replica of an ancient Roman slave collar.

Lifting a silver goblet to her lips, she drained yet another draft of mulled wine. She couldn't eat and the wine at least calmed her nerves. This afternoon she was to escort Lady Anne of Somerset to the ladies' solar for a meeting with Sir Paul de Groote. She wrung her hands in anguish. Surely removing her as chaperone for Lady Lilly could only mean that Lord Bruin or the king himself suspected she had more than a passing interest in Damien.

Catching her reflection in the polished metal mirror, she paused and drew herself up, squaring her shoulders. She decided in that moment she must be strong, as she was when they had returned her father's body to Parr Manor for burial. Over the course of the next two days, she must remove any suspicion of her involvement with Sir Damien or the king would surely blame him for her escape. Lord Bruin was, after all, just a man and she was now somewhat experienced. Mayhap she could bewitch him into believing she actually welcomed his advances. Would it be so hard to convince him that she, in fear of God's wrath, would prefer he wait to bed her until they had pledged their troth?

She'd disclosed Damien's plan to Meg that afternoon. Her loyal maid looked horrified, but her only comment was to remind her mistress that treason was

punishable by death. Angela then took her hands and explained that she loved Sir Damien. She insisted Meg promise that no matter what torture either of them endured, she was never to divulge this information.

Now, she called Meg into the room and quickly revealed her intention to fool Lord Bruin. She instructed Meg to relay the information to Byron as soon as possible. Meg bounced in a short curtsy then went to find Byron, leaving Angela to dress for the afternoon meeting.

Sir Paul de Groote stood in the center of ladies' solar with his hands clasped at his back. He greeted them with a beaming smile as Angela pushed Lady Ann inside. Lady Ann stood coyly as Sir Paul introduced himself, and Angela felt quite embarrassed as she translated his words.

"My dear wife died some six years ago birthing my stillborn son. She was only one and twenty. My decision to remain in England was somewhat selfish as I found myself too maudlin to remain in France. I have asked King William for the chance to discuss a betrothal between us. Although I know some of the knights care not if the women they choose are willing, this is not the case with me. I must say I have always wanted a large family and would treat your children as my own. There is only one condition. I will request that a son born from our joining be my heir. This is a condition that has been set by the king to ensure Norman blood continue to rule England. How say you?"

Lady Ann looked up at him, a frown marring her brow. "How do I know it was not *you* who slayed my dear husband?"

Sir Paul opened his arms wide and shook his head. "I 'av keeled many brave men, Madame, but iz it not true your 'usband perished at 'astings?"

Lady Anne placed a hand over her stomach and her eyes opened wide. "You speak English! Yes, he indeed fell in the Battle of Hastings."

Sir Paul's face crinkled in a frown. "I deed not 'ave the glory of that victory; I lay ill in my bed, felled by a sickness upon our arrival."

He spoke quickly to Angela in French and she conveyed his message.

"He says he is not skillful in English and is sorry for your loss. However, this

is a chance for both of you to start again. He says he is not without means and would ask you again to consider his proposal."

Ann nodded and smiled sweetly. "I do believe I will."

Sir Paul smiled, and despite her own troubles, Angela could not help but be pleased for the kindly, sad-eyed knight.

* * * * *

Damien raked his hands through his hair as he listened in silence to Byron. The very thought of Lord Bruin close to Lady Angela made his blood boil. He dismissed his squire and turned to meet his father's eyes.

"What am I to do, Father?"

Sir Luc de Anesi shrugged his broad shoulders. "This woman has spirit and she will place herself in danger to save you. This is most courageous, is it not? You must remain calm, my son. Stay cool-headed just as you did when you faced death many times in battle. To lose control now would seal your fate. Have no fear, for I will attend the forthcoming nuptials. I am sure with Robert there as well, we three can cause a suitable diversion for your lady to escape.

"But between now and then, you must draw any suspicion of infidelity away from Lady Angela. My advice is to take Lady Isobel on your arm this eve. Make all who witness you together believe you are in love. I will speak to the girl; she will indeed find great humor in such a farce."

Damien smiled wickedly. Lady Isobel was an impressive beauty with long, golden hair. Her heart belonged to his cousin, Jerome; they were to wed as soon as he returned from France.

"As usual, Father, I bow to your knowledge and wit."

* * * * *

Angela felt her confidence grow as she sat before the polished metal mirror, resplendent in her new gown. Meg continued to brush lavender oil through her hair

until it shone like silk. Angela thought it strange that she had brought no message from Damien. This evening they had packed a few of her precious belongings and two changes of clothes in a saddlebag procured from the stable. Meg was to deliver it secretly to Byron at breakfast.

The door to the chamber shook violently.

"Open," shouted Sir Bruin.

He strode inside the minute Meg turned the key, almost knocking her down.

Glaring at Angela, his cheeks crimson, he bellowed. "Why do you not wear my gift? Do you continue to dishonor me?"

Angela rose from the chair, fixed a smile on her face and turned to greet him. She curtseyed low.

"My Lord Bruin, would you do me the honor?" She waved a hand toward the open wooden box.

Lord Bruin's mood changed. He licked his lips and snatched the box from the dresser. Removing the necklace, he allowed the box to fall to the floor. As he walked up behind Angela, she wrinkled her nose. The man smelled of sweat and stale wine.

"Lift your hair so I may see the fine skin of your neck."

She did as he requested then remained quite still as he clasped the wide collar around her neck and secured it. The monstrosity dug into her skin and she found that moving her head more than an inch to look down was impossible. As she released her hair, Sir Bruin slid an arm around her waist and grinded his body hard against her. Wet lips met her cheek, and a strong smell of spoiled wine flooded her nostrils.

"You are learning quickly; I am well pleased. Indeed, this eve I even bathed at the king's advice as my plan is to bed you after our feast." He cupped her breasts with his large, fat hands and squeezing them roughly. "Leave us," he barked at Meg.

Angela took a steadying breath as he lifted her breasts from the front of her dress. He turned her to face him and licked his lips. She gasped as his mouth closed over one nipple, drawing it into his mouth. She remained dutifully still as he lavished attention on the other breast, sucking it hard and nibbling on the tender nipple.

I will endure this, she decided, disgusted with herself as a familiar wetness soaked her folds. He spun her around again, holding her back against his chest. She could feel his hard cock pressing against the small of her back.

"Lord Bruin, please, not now." She gave him a beseeching look over her shoulder as he lifted the back of her skirt and sunk his fingers into her wetness.

"You are ready for me." He grinned as he lifted his fingers to his mouth and licked away the moisture. "I would fuck you hard before dinner if the king were not expecting us soon."

Angela stepped from his embrace.

"My lord, indeed I feel the same. I would enjoy nothing more than to feel your naked body over mine. However, my faith is strong and in truth I cannot agree until we have pledged our troth before a priest."

The expression on Lord Bruin's face was so comical Angela could not help but smile. He looked at her with puppy dog eyes, and his bottom lip quivered.

"Then perhaps a kiss?" He begged, opening his arms as a thin line of drool spilled from the corner of his mouth and fell in a long string to the front of his shirt.

Angela took a deep breath and averted her gaze.. "Ah you tempt me sorely, my lord. Unholy lust sears my body from your touch. One kiss and I will be lost. How then would I stand before the priest with such debauched thoughts of you running through my head? In truth, 'tis only one more night I must endure without your masterly touch. Can you offer me this one consideration, my dearest lord?"

Lord Bruin tipped his head to one side and offered his arm. "Very well; but know that I ache for you. Come now. The king will be displeased if we enter the hall after he is seated."

* * * * *

They were far from late. In fact, the queue into the Great Hall was long and some time passed before Angela took her seat beside Sir Paul and Lady Anne. They sat at the queen's end of the table and Angela noticed Sir Robert and Lady Lilly

sitting at the far end. She was conversing with Sir Paul and Lady Anne when Lord Bruin let out a short laugh. Angela turned her head and he smiled broadly.

"I admit I was enraged when I caught you openly admiring Sir Damien, but I see he has caught himself a rare beauty."

Angela's gaze darted to the head of the table and her hands clenched great bunches of her skirts. Damien was openly kissing the cheek of a remarkably beautiful woman, his hand wrapped intimately around her waist. Sir Robert sat on the woman's other side, grinning broadly. Damien continued his outrageous behavior until they all rose to their feet as King William and Queen Matilda arrived.

Angela could do no more than pick at her food as Damien continued to lavish attention on his companion. He fed her with his fingers and grinned as if he were besotted. A deep feeling of dread flooded through her and the collar around her neck felt as if it was restricting the air to her lungs. She began to cough and then when she tried to relieve the sensation with a sip of wine, she began to choke. It was not Lord Bruin who came to her aid, but Sir Paul, who in one swift movement lifted her hair and removed the collar.

Lord Bruin stood, food cascading across the table from his tunic, and mumbled his thanks to Sir Paul. He patted Angela's arm and offered to escort her to her chamber.

"I think it would be best, my lord. Indeed, the excitement has been too much for me this eve."

Angela took his offered arm. They walked toward the king, and Lord Bruin gave his apologies. As she looked back, she spotted Damien gazing in her direction. He shook his head slightly and then returned to lavishing attention upon his companion.

* * * * *

That night Angela lay in bed, too ill to even cry. The next day at noon she was to marry Lord Bruin. She placed her hands on her head in an effort to stop the throbbing ache but nothing would help the intense physical pain that surrounded

her heart. Music from the Great Hall filtered in through the windows. She had flung them open, hoping the cool night air would sooth her. She could not erase the sight of Damien kissing that woman, and her imagination conjured up images of him lying between her thighs.

“Lady Angela?”

Damien! He stood at her bedchamber door, blocking the light from the candle behind him, his hair an angelic halo. She slipped from her bed, unconscious of her nakedness.

“Why are you here? How did you pass through a locked door?” she said.

Damien walked slowly toward her. He wrapped her in his arms and pulled her close. The cloth of his fine shirt caressed her tender breasts and his familiar musky scent filled her with wanton desire.

“Dear lady, I am here to love you, my angel, and I could not wait another second. You are tense; is all well with you?”

Angela tipped her head and looked into his eyes, so dark in the candlelight.

“You seemed well entertained this eve, Sir Damien. In fact, so much so that I thought you lost to me.”

Damien cupped the back of her head and smiled down at her. “If you were convinced then my ruse worked. Lady Isobel is betrothed to my cousin and she merely played a role this evening to assist us.”

“To assist us?”

“Yes. ‘Twas my father’s idea to draw suspicion away from us by making everyone believe I had found someone else.”

Angela sighed as he took her lips. His words made sense, and her heart rejoiced as he swept her into his strong arms and carried her to the bed. He left her for a few seconds to lock the door then wasted no time removing his clothes and joining her. Angela moaned as he kissed her neck. Her whole being ached for his masterful touch. How would she live in celibacy after this?

“Good sir, will you stay here with me tonight?” She begged.

Damien kissed her aching nipples, swirling his tongue around each hard bud before he lifted his head.

"I must leave before sunrise, milady, or for certain I will be seen, but we have all night, sweet angel."

Angela lifted his chin with her finger. "What is to become of us, Sir Damien? When I am secured in the convent how must I pray for forgiveness of this sin when I have wanted you so?"

Damien licked a path across her bottom lip and growled deep in his chest. "Did we not pledge our troth before God? In truth, in His eyes we have wed. It requires only a public declaration to make it legal. We have not sinned, angel. Indeed, the sin is Lord Bruin's for asking for your troth when it is already given to another."

Angela twirled a lock of his hair around her index finger and looked away.

Damien sighed deeply. "Ah, you think I will abandon you? This is not so. *I love you*, Lady Angela of Parr, and I will do what is necessary to gain your hand with the king's blessing. Your public refusal of Sir Bruin before God in the chapel will be dangerous to you, as King William is unpredictable in his justice of late. That is why you must escape to the safety of the convent. Even the king dare not enter there for fear of excommunication."

Angela pulled his head down to her mouth and heard his moan as he plundered her lips. If this was to be their last night of bliss, she wanted it to last forever. She pushed her hands into his hair as he bent to suckle and nip at her hard peaks. He ground his hard cock against her hip, rocking against her. His movement, his closeness alone, brought on a gush of wetness and she cried out in frustration.

"Damien, please."

He responded to her urgent plea by pushing her thighs apart with his knees and entering her in one swift movement. She felt her body stretch deliciously to accommodate him. His thick cock filled her so completely and when he moved hard and deep within her the pleasure was unbearable. She spiraled out of control, raking his back and calling out his name. She felt his hot seed bathing her channel, his sigh against her cheek. She wanted this to last for eternity and a sob racked her body.

Damien withdrew and rolled her close to his side. She trembled against him,

her cheeks wet with tears.

"These tears must stop, dear lady. If we must part, the memory to sustain us must be one of happiness, of pleasure," he said, kissing her salty lips.

Damien felt his body tremble at her delightful response. She rose up and kissed him deeply, passionately. Placing her small hands on his chest, she kissed his neck. Her hard, wet nipples brushed his chest. Her kisses trailed down his body, sending tremors of delight cascading through him. His cock grew hard as a rock. Her hot tongue licked a tantalizing path to his belly, and he reached for her hair, balling it in both fists. He growled as her tongue hesitantly flicked the head of his cock. His eyes rolled back in his head as she ran her tongue along his shaft. He lay still in torturous pleasure as she sucked him into her wet, luscious mouth.

"Dear sweet lady, hold, or I will spill, and I have yet to enjoy every part of you." He pulled her up against his chest, pushed the bolster to the edge of the bed, and turned her onto her belly. Her white rounded bottom, so soft, so curvaceous, rose up toward him. He stroked her curves and she moaned delightfully as he kissed every inch of her bottom. He pushed his knees between her legs and she opened like a pink rose, damp with morning dew. She mewed in frustration and ground her nub wantonly against his fingers as he explored her swollen folds. She was so wet the tops of her legs glistened with moisture. He dipped inside, trailed his soaking fingers up the crevice of her bottom to the small puckered hole, and circled it gently. He pressed and her tight crevice opened to him.

"Damien!" She gasped and turned to look at him, her pink flushed face showing her surprise.

"Do you want me to teach you forbidden pleasure?" He kissed a trail along the small of her back.

"Can it be any more delightful?" She wiggled impatiently under his touch.

"Oh yes, so much more. Exquisite, in fact, but you must trust me. Do you trust me, Angela?"

"Yes." Angela sighed and relaxed, resting her head on the bed. Her heart pounded and a strange excitement thrummed through her body. He was so bold!

His probing fingers made her swoon. She craved him and lifted her bottom to his touch. She could hear him chuckle and a groan escaped her lips as he moved away. He returned with his leg bindings and gently tied both her wrists to the top of the bed. She turned her head; his face was serious as he arranged the bolster under her hips. She felt a wave of excitement flutter through to her core as she lay restrained, so open, so exposed to his gaze.

He moved behind her and struck the flint to light the candle. She could hear as he fumbled with something on her dresser. She smiled up at him as he brought the candle close and set it beside the bed.

"You are bold, Lady Angela, so delightfully bold. We will have much enjoyment exploring ways to give and receive pleasure. You must relax and give in to the hunger. The small torment of pain only leads to a greater satisfaction. I promise you."

Angela felt the bed dip as he sat beside her, his hand stroking the curve of her back. The fragrance of rose oil suddenly flooded the room. So that was what he was looking for in amongst her bottles and lotions. He massaged every inch of her bottom with the oil. She could not stop moaning in pleasure as he dribbled the liquid along the crack and pushed his oily fingers deep inside her. He withdrew and she moaned her displeasure, gasping when his hand came down once then twice on her buttocks in a stinging slap.

He spoke gently to her as he rubbed the welts before slapping her again. Rolls of exhilarating tremors echoed up her channel and she squirmed with delight.

"I knew you would enjoy this and there is so much more," he said as he reached for the candle.

Damien smiled at her lust-filled eyes as he lifted the candle. Her buttocks were bright pink and moisture leaked from her channel, soaking the bed. Her body writhed and she begged him for release when he tormented her hard pearl with his fingers. He stroked his fingers in and out of her soaking channel and tipped the candle. She jumped as the sting of the hot wax splashed over her red bottom, then growled deep in her throat. Her hips pumped the bed and her hands tugged on the

restraints. He could see sweat glistening across her back. He tipped the candle again and she climaxed against his hand.

"Naughty wench; now I will have to start all over again," he said softly, landing a slap on each rosy red cheek.

He straddled her body, his cock grinding hard into her back. He pushed his hands under her chest. His fingers found her rock hard nipples and he squeezed them between his thumb and finger. She moaned loudly.

"Tell me what you desire, Lady Angela."

She lifted her head, her face covered by her long silken hair. "I want you *there* . . . were you touched me earlier; I want you now before the madness consumes me," she gasped.

He sat up and pulled the hair from her face.

"Soon, my love, soon."

Angela's heart pounded so fast she was sure it would burst forth from her chest. Damien again dropped hot candle wax onto her buttocks. She felt his breath on her as he licked a trail across her burning flesh. She cried out in frenzied passion as his hot, wet tongue probed and entered her forbidden hole.

He moved, positioning his body between her legs, and she stiffened. His hands collected her long hair and he wound it around his hand and pulled her head up.

"Open your legs. Come on, sweeting. Trust me," he purred.

Angela sighed and relaxed. He caressed her aching folds with the head of his cock, glided up the crack then pressed against her tight hole. She wanted this pleasure. She did. But her head swum in confusion as he plunged inside; the pain was sharp and she gasped. He stilled, stroking her back and murmuring soft words of encouragement. The pain passed swiftly and she felt her body relax. She felt so full with his delicious cock buried deep inside her.

Damien growled as he withdrew and then drove deeply into her. He pulled delightfully at her hair and rode her hard. Her legs shook as deep erotic tremors sent waves of indescribable pleasure through her entire being. He dropped her hair and it

cascaded across her face, sticking to her sweat-coated cheeks. His fingers dug into her hips as he pulled her toward him. This felt so different; the heat from his cock was glorious. She wanted him deeper, harder. She wanted this to never stop.

Damien felt his control slipping as he grabbed her hips and drove himself deep. Dear Lord, she was tight. Her groans of pleasure spurred him on and he took her hard and fast. Her body was heavy with the scent of arousal and he could feel her pulsating deep within as her climax began to build. He quickened his pace and the room echoed with the slap of their naked bodies coming together. She shuddered violently as her release came, crying out his name. He held her firmly in place and enjoyed her heat until he spilled his seed deep within.

The bed chamber doors shook as Lord Bruin hammered on the wooden panels, demanding Meg open to him immediately. Angela could hear Meg's voice as she implored Lord Bruin to wait until she dressed. Damien eased himself from within her and reached for his clothes.

"I have no time to dress; we are undone." He quickly untied her hands then stroked the hair back from her damp face.

"Not so. Take yourself to Meg's chamber and dress within. I will occupy Lord Bruin here until you make your escape," Angela said, pulling the cover over her nakedness. She watched as he pulled on his breeches and gathered up his clothes before unlocking the bedchamber door.

Meg entered the room, her face going crimson when she spied Damien.

"Meg, you must conceal Sir Damien in your room until he can escape. Hurry now, and then you will escort Lord Bruin into my chamber."

Damien looked down at her with hooded eyes. "You only have to call out if that ox causes you harm and I will show myself. I do not fear Lord Bruin and hiding like this is cowardly."

Angela smiled sweetly. "Would seem, Sir Damien, that we both must do objectionable things in order to achieve our goals. Now go; Lord Bruin grows impatient."

Damien wrestled with all his father had taught him about chivalry. He waited none too patiently inside Meg's small chamber. The doors to both bedchambers were open wide. In his hiding place behind the door, he could clearly hear the conversation between Angela and the very intoxicated Lord Bruin.

"I can wait no more, dear lady, please uncover your bounty so that I may feast upon you."

Angela replied curtly. "You say you wish to take my maidenhead and then have no memory of such in the morning? Be gone with you, Lord Bruin, for I'll have none of this nonsense."

"Come now; this day or the next, it matters not. Open your legs so I may plunge deep within."

A loud thump sounded and Lord Bruin howled as if a horse had kicked him. Angela's voice echoed through the room, harsh and shrill.

"Go will know, sir, and I swear to you that until our vows are sanctioned before a priest, you will not lay one finger upon me."

Damien peeked around the door as Lord Bruin staggered from Angela's bedchamber holding his head. A trickle of crimson blood spilled from his nose, staining his shirtfront. Meg ran passed him and flung open the door to the hallway. He watched with amusement as Lord Bruin staggered down out, swearing every oath known to man.

Damien stepped from his hiding place and could not stop a wide grin from crossing his face as he walked into Angela's bedchamber.

"Bravo, my lady, I am most impressed." He bowed low before her. She looked wild-eyed and ravishingly beautiful, her fingers clutching a large silver jug.

Angela laughed. She placed the jug on the nightstand and ran into his arms. He swung her around, crushing her lips in a lingering kiss. When he finally pulled away, she turned to Meg.

"Leave us," she said. "I will not require you before morning."

Chapter Six

Damien slid his sword into the scabbard at his waist and straightened his mustard-colored tunic. He was more unsettled this morn than before the many battles he had faced these past years. He had held Angela in his passionate embrace all night and left her just before the sun had lifted its yellow head over the horizon. She had clung to him, fearful of his leaving, behaving as if she were going to meet the axe. He had given his word then to save her from Lord Bruin. His last memory of her tear-stained cheeks and terrified eyes burned into his soul.

A knock sounded on his door, and Damien opened to find Robert, his face solemn, standing in the hall.

"Are you ready?" his brother asked.

"As ever I will be."

The two men made their way to the chapel, where they met their parents at the door. Damien's father took him to one side and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"Have faith that the plan will work. Byron waits with horses outside; it only takes your lady to play her part," he whispered as they bowed to the altar and made their way between the rows of pews. A noisy, brightly dressed congregation packed the chapel to capacity. Sir Luc led his family through the milling people and they found their seats in the second pew from the front.

King William and Queen Matilda, both wearing golden crowns and ermine-collared, red flowing robes, entered the chapel. The congregation fell silent as they stopped in front of the altar and bowed. They crossed themselves before reclining on two thrones set to one side. The king glanced at Damien and raised a brow as if surprised to see him in attendance.

Angela arrived on the arm of Lord Bruin. Her face was gray, but to Damien she resembled a goddess floating in a sea of pale blue. Her hair hung loosely to her waist, as glossy as a raven's wing. Forget-me-nots woven into a headdress secured a head rail that hung to her shoulders. She gripped an old, leather-bound prayer book close to her chest. His heart raced uncomfortably as the king's guards filtered silently into the chapel, positioning themselves at every entrance.

The couple bowed before the altar, turned and bowed again before the king

and queen. Lord Bruin wore a finely made silk tunic and he smirked toward Damien as he took his place before the altar. Angela cast him a look that sunk his heart; she appeared completely, utterly terrified.

Angela took her place before the altar and knelt on trembling knees, waiting for the priest to commence the ceremony. The priest droned on for some time, sermonizing about wifely duties and respect and obedience. Many prayers followed, spoken first in French then in English. When she finally rose to her feet her legs were numb. Lord Bruin took her hand possessively, his face ruddy and his breath stinking of stale wine. The priest turned to her and asked for her to pledge her troth.

Gathering her courage, Angela shook her head. "I will not! I do not want to wed Lord Bruin," she said, her voice loud and as clear as crystal.

An excited mumble went around the small chapel as people asked each other if they had heard her declaration. The priest raised his hands for quiet and asked her again. Angela shook her head and stepped away from Lord Bruin.

"No! My answer is no, not now, not ever," she declared.

Lord Bruin turned toward her, his face red and his eyes bulging.

"How dare you refuse me, Saxon wench. You will do as you are told. Get on with it, Father," he spat, reaching for her and pulling her roughly to his side.

Angela pulled away from his grasp. She felt sure her legs would collapse and she would tumble to the floor.

"No. I will not. As God is my witness, I cannot take you to husband," she said.

Lord Bruin cursed her, his face becoming purple. He lifted his hands to her neck as if to throttle her.

"I beseech you, Father, to allow me to wait in the oratory until Lord Bruin has become more reasonable. I beg sanctuary.." Angela pleaded as she spun from Lord Bruin's grasp. She glanced at Damien. Wild-eyed, he had his hand on his sword as if ready to pounce. She shook her head slightly at him; it would do no good to involve him yet.

King William lifted his hand and the chapel fell silent.

"I have given you to Lord Bruin, Lady Angela of Parr. You would seek our

displeasure by refusing to marry him? Do you wish to spend your entire life confined to a convent?"

Angela turned toward the king, her back straight and her head held high. She curtsied respectfully low before rising and meeting his eyes.

"I have good reason not to pledge my troth to Lord Bruin, my liege, and yes, if needs be I am prepared to spend my life in a convent if this matter cannot be resolved."

King William got to his feet and walked toward Angela. He stood before her. His regal bearing caused her to quake with fear.

"Enough of your insolence, Saxon; I *order* you to marry Lord Bruin under threat of death." He spoke through clenched teeth, his eyes narrowing to slits.

Angela lifted her chin defiantly, although Damien noticed her hands trembling as she clutched her prayer book. He rested his hand on the hilt of his sword, ready to take on the world if needs be to rescue her from this travesty.

"I cannot marry Lord Bruin, my liege, as I have already given my troth before God to another," she said with a slight quiver to her voice.

"Name him, madam, for marry me you will, as soon as I make you a widow," Lord Bruin bellowed as he moved toward her menacingly and raised an arm as if to strike her.

"I will not." She stepped back toward the priest, clutching her prayer book to her chest.

Damien jumped over the pew before him, pushing people aside in his haste, and slid across the stone floor. He stood protectively in front of Angela, shielding her with his body. He glared at Lord Bruin and drew his sword with a metallic whine. He jabbed it menacingly toward the old man.

"You will not touch one hair on my wife's head, milord. I declare here in public that Lady Angela of Parr is my wife."

"Is this true, wench?" Lord Bruin asked as he drew his sword.

"Aye, I swear before God and king that Sir Damien de Anesi is indeed my husband," she proclaimed in a voice loud enough for all to hear.

An excited murmur of disbelief rumbled through the congregation.

"Then I will have much pleasure in cutting him down where he stands." Lord Bruin laughed maniacally, twirling his blade and moving toward Damien.

"This is a house of God; put down your weapons," the priest said, bravely, albeit foolishly stepping between them, his hands outstretched. The priest, his long robes flowing, turned his horrified face toward King William.

"Sire, this chapel gives sanctuary to the Lady Angela. I beg you to command your most honorable knights to sheath their weapons for fear of excommunication."

King William stepped forward and yelled to his guards. "Arrest Sir Damien and confine Lady Angela to her chamber. Lord Bruin, you will follow me."

The king turned on his heel and stormed from the chapel. Queen Matilda and a line of finely dressed ladies-in-waiting followed, running behind him to keep up.

The crowd fell silent as the king's guards surrounded Damien. Lord Bruin turned and spat at Angela, loudly declaring her a whore before exiting the chapel. Helpless to do otherwise, Damien allowed the guards to take his sword and roughly drag him away. He turned to see Angela, her hand balled into a fist at her mouth, tears spilling down her cheeks.

"I love you, my wife." He called out as he was hauled away. His father and Robert followed close on his heels.

* * * * *

Inside a small dark cell deep in the bowels of the castle, Damien collapsed onto a pile of rat-infested straw. He rested his head in his hands. He could think of nothing but Angela's pale, tear-streaked face and his failure to keep her safe. He pondered the future, knowing the vile temper of his king would prevail. Without doubt, he would charge him with treason, and he would meet the executioner.

He admitted to himself that he knew the consequences before he bedded Angela. He would do it all again, he decided. To lie in her arms was the only heaven he needed. Angela would suffer for their actions, to be sure, but at least during her time with him she had experienced true love. He desperately hoped that the sweet

memory of their time together would sustain her through the agony to come. The king would insist she marry Lord Bruin as soon as his head left his body; for her, there was no escape.

Damien moaned in deep despair. He sat staring at the filth beneath his boots until darkness engulfed him and the vermin infesting the cells began to take more than a passing interest in his feet. He stood, brushing the dust from his breeches, and paced up and down until he heard footsteps and the rattle of his jailer's keys.

A bright lantern stung his eyes but he welcomed the sight of his father, who pushed into the cell past the stone-faced guard.

"I have managed to convince the king to grant you the chance to voice a defense; hurry now, he is fast losing patience."

Within the Great Chamber, the king sat beside the fire, a large tankard of mulled wine in one hand. He had his legs stretched out, his stocking-covered feet resting on a pillow near the hearth. Lord Bruin sat opposite him on the edge of his seat, his hand gripping the hilt of his sword. He glared at Damien when he entered the room, flanked by his father and Robert.

King William raised his head and scowled at the group standing before him.

"Well, Sir Luc, you must have good reason to beg lenience for this traitor you call a son. Speak well, Sir Damien, and should one word of deception pass your lips, I'll cut you down where you stand."

Damien bowed and kept his eyes lowered in respect.

"Majesty, I have served you well for seven years and in that time have fought many battles at your side. I am no traitor. I gave my troth to Lady Angela before your wishes for her future were known to me."

"Then why did you not inform us of this when we refused your petition for her hand?"

Damien felt as if a knife was twisting in his gut, torn between his love for Lady Angela and loyalty to his king.

"Sire, in truth I did not want to displease you and thought mayhap to find a way to change your mind. I have nothing to say in my defense other than I had no

knowledge of your wishes in regard to Lady Angela before I pledged my troth to her."

The king stroked his chin and turned his gaze toward Lord Bruin.

"What say you?"

"I say annul the marriage as it has yet to be consummated."

Robert stepped forward. "Majesty, my brother confided in me some days ago that his wife may already be with child."

"Is this true?" said the king, raising his hand to prevent Lord Bruin's retort.

Damien released a deep sigh. "Indeed it is so, and we lay together last eve. I was there when Lord Bruin entered my wife's bedchamber in a drunken state. He refused to leave and my wife had to strike him upon the head. Is that not true, sir?"

Lord Bruin jumped to his feet, his hand on his sword. "Liar! I challenge you, Sir Damien de Anesi, to a contest of honor."

Damien lifted his lips into a snarl. "I accept your challenge, Lord Bruin. On my condition that you will fight me yourself and not hiding behind a proxy like a wench — *and* we shall fight to the death."

Lord Bruin smiled cruelly. "Agreed but on *my* condition that your *wife* observes our challenge so she may witness your death by my sword."

Damien lifted his chin. One last glimpse of Angela to take to heaven, or mayhap feel her love to ensure his victory. "Agreed."

King William smiled. "This pleases me. A true Norman way to settle the matter and Lady Angela will be the prize; you will fight at noon on the morrow. Sir Damien, you are free to prepare, but the lady will remain under guard in her chamber. Do you both agree to the terms of the contest?"

Damien nodded, as did Lord Bruin, and the king curtly dismissed them all. Damien backed respectfully from the room then followed Robert through the keep and up the spiral staircase that led to his bedchamber.

As he lay in his cold bed, his only thought was for Angela. A mixture of elation and dread flowed through him. The happiness that she was now his wife brought with it a desperate fear that God forbid he should lose to Lord Bruin, she would have to endure a lifetime of hell.

* * * * *

Sleep had not come for Angela; and indeed, the first rays of dawn brought an unbearable grief. She could not eat a morsel of the fine platter of food delivered to her room. Instead, she remained on her knees, her eyes closed and facing toward heaven, her hands clutched in prayer. She begged God to protect Damien and to give him just victory. She prayed for his eternal soul should he kill Lord Bruin.

Too soon, the guards arrived to collect her, and she rose unsteadily to her feet. She fastened a deep blue robe around her neck and walked between them, head high, trying desperately to control the tremors that wracked her body. Her escort said nothing as they led her toward the Great Hall. As they reached the massive wooden doors, she took a deep breath to steady herself and clutched her father's dilapidated prayer book to her chest. The crowd within the hall was boisterous. Many more men and women hung over the upper level railings, spilling tankards of ale, laughing and shouting obscenities at Angela as she stepped inside.

Knights dressed in battle armor stood grim-faced in an impressive circle, keeping the crowd at bay. Angela made eye contact with Sir Paul and he nodded and offered her a thin smile. She stood alone, dwarfed by the guards. What a pitiful farce that men would find such joy at the prospect of two good men slaying each other, she mused.

Sir Luc and Sir Robert walked toward her, bowed, and then stood behind her. She felt secure and grateful for their presence. Sir Robert stepped forward and leaned close.

"Damien may well win but should he fall make thy way to the stables with haste," he told her, speaking low. "We will cause a diversion; this you must promise, as it is his wish."

Angela felt panic rise up and took a deep breath to steady her nerves. She nodded in agreement and remained silent as trumpets sounded, and the King and Queen took their seats.

Lord Bruin arrived with a confident air and bowed toward the king. His

squire walked behind him, carrying an assortment of weapons, including a cruel spiked bludgeon. Angela gasped as Damien strode into the hall alone with his chest bare, wearing only black leather breeches and boots. He bowed to the king then turned his gaze toward her. His lips rose slightly at the corners. His eyes remained fixed to hers as he paused to fasten his long fair hair at his nape with a leather thong.

Lord Bruin swore colorfully as Damien removed his heavy silver sword from the long black scabbard at his waist and took a fighting stance.

"Fool, you insult me by not wearing protection and carrying no weapons other than your sword. But no matter; die well, traitor." He lifted his sword with both hands and attacked.

Angela could feel every bone-shattering blow Lord Bruin inflicted on her love. The old man was surprisingly light on his feet and moved with incredible speed. Damien was remarkably skilful and successfully blocked his opponent's onslaught. The muscles in his arms bulged as he raised and swung the heavy sword with both hands. He dipped and waved, avoiding the blows, twisting and side-stepping in a deadly dance.

"Fight me, you coward, or are you tired from fucking your wife? I should mayhap thank you, for now I will find easy entry." Lord Bruin grinned as he lashed out at Damien.

The noise grew to a frightening level. The crowd roared as the swords clashed, sending sparks into the air, and Lord Bruin continued to rain insults and blows upon Damien. This was the side of Damien Angela had never wanted to see. This ferocious man, this warrior knight, was her gentle husband, her tender lover. His handsome face was a mask of fierce determination, his eyes had turned almost black and his stern expression would cast fear into any foe.

'Twas as if he was waiting for the older man to tire as he would only defend himself. Finally, their swords shrieked as they locked together. The two sweat-covered men stared into each other's eyes. Lord Bruin drew a dagger from his belt and plunged it deeply into Damien's left bicep. A scream escaped Angela's lips, the world spun and she slumped into Sir Robert's arms. But her eyes would not shut to conceal the sickening horror of Damien's scarlet blood spilling in an endless stream

to the floor.

"Ha! This night I'll lie between your wife's soft thighs, for as soon as you take your last breath the priest will bind us. She will never refuse me again and if she does I will beat her soundly and enjoy her pain." Lord Bruin confidently boasted as he savagely ripped the knife from Damien's arm.

Damien's mouth tightened into a thin line as he pushed Lord Bruin back and easily swept his feet. The old man fell onto his back, cursing and lashing at the air with his sword. The dagger slipped from his grasp and slid across the floor, coming to rest at Damien's feet. He kicked the blade to one side and stepped back, waiting for Lord Bruin to regain his feet.

"Look how you wallow on the ground, *milord*. You're so fat, you can't find your cock to take a piss, let alone lay with a woman. Methinks you're better suited to fuck with a pig," Damian said.

Lord Bruin brushed away the offered hand of his squire and pushed himself to his feet.

"I'll be sure to make your wife squeal like a pig this eve," he retorted.

"Not while I live and live I shall." Damien spoke quietly, and yet his voice carried.

Lord Bruin swung his blade recklessly as Damien attacked, parrying his sword with consummate ease. Lord Bruin lost ground and staggered back toward the wall and in one swift move, Damien spun the older man's blade from his grasp. His eyes widened as Damien stepped forward and pinned him against the wall, his sword resting a breath away from his heart.

"Yield, Lord Bruin, for I do not want to sully my soul with your death," growled Damien.

Lord Bruin smiled thinly and grasped Damien's blade between his gloved hands.

"Nay, 'tis better to die thusly than live with the shame you have brought upon me." He pushed forward, plunging the sword deep into his heart. He slumped back against the wall and crumpled to the floor, a trickle of blood escaping the corner of his mouth.

Damien shook his head and pulled the sword slowly from Lord Bruin's limp body before turning toward the king and bowing his head respectfully.

King William stood and raised his arms. "It is done; Sir Damien has succeeded in this challenge and wins the prize. I give my blessing to his marriage to the Lady Angela of Parr. Lord Bruin fought well, but he leaves no heir to his fortune or estates, therefore I bequeath all his worldly goods to the victor, Sir Damien de Anesi."

Damien's father rushed to his side and tied a strip of linen firmly around his injured arm. Damien looked around wildly, searching the milling mob for his wife. Their eyes met as Robert pushed her through the crowd and into the open. Tears ran down her pale face, but her smile was radiant. She stood with her arms extended toward him and he ran to her and swung her around. The crowd roared in delight as Damien pulled her close to his bare chest and her arms encircled his neck. He felt her shiver as his mouth closed on hers for a long, possessive kiss. She felt so soft, so right and as their tongues tangled the crowd around them disappeared. Angela moaned as he pulled his head away. She looked up into his eyes and he saw her love, her passion.

"I love you, my husband." Angela buried her face in Damien's neck, and the warmth of his body cocooned her in velvet serenity. She heard nothing but the whisper in her ear.

"And I love *you*, my wife. You are *mine*, Lady Angela of Parr, my angel for now and forever."

~The End~

About the Author:

H. C. Brown lives in Queensland, Australia where she enjoys walking along the long, white sandy beaches.

H. C. Brown

She loves to read and finds peace in painting waterfalls and fairies. Her passion is writing, which she does most days. She finds that variety is the spice of life and her stories run the gamut, from a murder mystery series to historical, paranormal and time travel – all with a healthy dose of spice.

She married her very own alpha male and he is her love and inspiration.

Learn more about H. C. Brown by visiting [her Web site](#).

* * * * *

If you enjoyed *Betrothed to the Enemy*, you might also like the following books from Noble Romance Publishing:

[Danu's Daughter by Terri Pray](#)

[Decadent Deceptions by Keta Diablo](#)

[Wenches in Pantries by AJ Michaels](#)