

Renaud

Knights of Normandy Book One

By

Maryse Dawson

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Chapter One

A Norman Conquest

Somerset, England 1071

"Wherefore doth thou love him?" huffed Cynwise, staring hard at her sister.

Elfreda Golderon looked at her younger sister and sighed.

"Cynwise, desist! Sir Gerard de Clairvoy will become my husband, despite thy misgivings. Think of our future." She paced the small dwelling they shared and flung her arm around. "Just look around thee, Cynwise. No longer will we hath to live in such a small abode. When I make this marriage, we shall both live in comfort at Ilchester Castle."

"But Elfreda...a Norman? Wherefore cannot thee marry a man of noble Saxon birth?"

"Cynwise, the Normans hath conquered us nigh on five years...'tis time thee accepted thy fate. Gerard loves me, and I am thankful for that. 'Twill mean a goodly future for us both."

"Goodly? When we must adhere to Norman rule! Nay, 'tis not a good thing thee do, sister. I shall remain here. Go to thy castle and forget me!" she stated dramatically, turning away to stare blankly out of the small cottage window.

Elfreda walked over to her and, placing a hand on her shoulder, spoke softly. "Cynwise, I wouldst never let thee live alone here; wherefore doth thou think I hath been teaching thee Norman French? Thou knowest thou art dearer to me than anyone. The thought of thee living on thy own doth not bear thinking about. Times are troubled, and thee will be safe behind the thick walls of Ilchester Castle. Here, alone...anything could happen."

Cynwise, hearing the concern in her sister's voice, softened slightly and patted her hand. "Forgive me, Elfreda. But we hath seen so many of our kinsmen die at the hands of these bastard Normans. To think thee could marry one – 'tis hard to accept."

"Mayhap, one day thee, too, will marry a Norman."

Cynwise gasped and whirled around, spitting on the floor in disgust. "Nay! Those Norman bastards will never conquer me!"

Elfreda rolled her eyes. "I fear no one wouldst marry thee, with such a temper."

"Algar, son of Eldred, would."

"Algar? He is but a mere blacksmith. Thou knowest Father wouldst never hath let thee marry so low."

"Father is no longer here."

"As thy elder sister, I wouldst never give permission for such a marriage. When I marry, the decision-making will be made by my husband, Gerard."

Cynwise gasped. "Thou wouldst let a Norman decide whom I marry?"

"Aye. 'Tis the way of things, Cynwise. The sooner thou learn to abide by their rule, the better." She tugged on Cynwise's hand and pulled her towards the door. "Come, we need to pick some meadow flowers if I am to look my best for my wedding, tomorrow."

The next day arrived much too soon for Cynwise. She opened her eyes and groaned as the bright sunlight filtered in through the small window. Elfreda, lying beside her, stretched and blinked slowly as she also awoke. This was to be the last morning they spent in their ancestral home. Humble it might be, but it was the only home they'd ever had.

With sadness, Cynwise looked around the simple, one-room dwelling. Their parents had succumbed to smallpox two years ago, leaving their daughters to fend alone in the world. Elfreda had been ill but, thankfully, nursed by Cynwise, she had survived the terrible disease.

Elfreda playfully poked her in the ribs. "'Tis thy turn to feed the pigs. They will not feed themselves."

Cynwise raised an eyebrow and poked her back. "Aye, sister dearest, and thee will be feeding thine own Norman pig this eve!"

Elfreda gasped and went to slap her, but she was too slow. Cynwise had already leapt from the bed.

Cynwise grinned wickedly at her sister as she began to dress. "Elfreda, thou knowest I speak the truth."

"Hush, Cynwise. Thy tongue will get thee into trouble one of these days."

"If my Saxon tongue doth annoy a Norman, then he only hath to return from whence he came!" she exclaimed hotly, before flouncing out of the house.

Their four pigs snuffled around happily as Cynwise gave them the scraps from the previous day's dinner. Standing on the bottom rung of the fence, she looked across the fields at the imposing Ilchester Castle. It was newly built and owned by her sister's betrothed, Sir Gerard de Clairvoy,

and would now be her new home, too.

She had only met Gerard a few times, and she had to admit, grudgingly, that he seemed a pleasant enough fellow. He was a dark-haired man of muscular build, in his early thirties. He had learned their language well, having lived in England since the Norman invasion in 1066 and was currently in the process of teaching Elfreda to speak his native French. She had taken to it well and had, with a little bullying, managed to teach Cynwise all she knew. Cynwise decided that although she would never accept the Normans as conquerors of her land, learning their language would be beneficial – that way, they could hide nothing from her, the devious scoundrels. As far as she was concerned, they would always be the interlopers, but it did not harm to have a hidden weapon.

Pulling a face, she went to step down from the fence and immediately gave a small shriek as two hands encompassed her waist.

"'Tis only me, Cynwise! I was lending a hand."

She heaved a sigh of relief as she heard Algar's voice. "Algar, thou didst frighten me."

He let go of her and looked over at the pigs. "I hath come to help with the livestock. Am I too early?"

"A little, Algar, but no matter. Wouldst thee take some refreshment?"

"Aye, I would." He fell into step beside her as she walked back to the cottage. "'Twill not be the same, without thee."

Cynwise blushed. "I will only be over there, Algar." She pointed to the castle.

"Aye, but thee might as well be on t'other side of the world. 'Tis a strong fortress and not for the likes of me, Cynwise."

"Oh, Algar. We shall see each other often, I promise thee. I may even be able to get thee a position there."

His face turned angry. "I will never work for the Normans!" he said vehemently. "My father lay down his life at Hastings. I will never forgive them, never!"

"I feel the same, Algar, but fate hath decreed that I live within those walls. It dost not mean that we cannot see each other. Wouldst thee still like to meet?"

Algar smiled, and she warmed inside. "Aye, Cynwise. How, though?"

"We shall find a way. Come inside and see Elfreda. Today is her marriage day, and despite marrying a Norman, we shall both be happy for her."

Algar shook his head but, nevertheless, pinned a smile to his face and went inside the

dwelling.

* * *

Sir Renaud de Clairvoy looked up admiringly at the vast castle before him. His older brother, Gerard, had done well by King William. He, himself, had been given a large plot of land over at Dunster, and the last two years, he had been busy building a stone coastal defence.

Both had joined William in his conquest to overthrow Harold and gain power to the English throne. And as other knights in the same position, William gave them all land, on the proviso that they held it in the name of the Normans and would aid William as and when needed.

Today, his brother was to marry a girl of noble Saxon birth, Elfreda Golderon, whom Renaud had yet to meet. As long as his brother was happy, though, that was good enough for him. He himself would prefer a girl of Norman blood, but they were few and far between in Somerset. He'd dallied with the idea of travelling back to France and bringing a bride back with him, but he would need William's permission to do so and as yet, he hadn't got round to asking him.

Life at Dunster had been too hectic, what with the build and trying to keep the Saxon rebels at bay. He had come for the wedding, safe in the knowledge that his garrison of men left behind would guard the walls well.

He took off his gauntlets and rubbed his hands together briskly as he jumped down from his horse. His squire immediately took over the reins and led his destrier into the stables.

Renaud smiled heartily. He had come to feast and make merry, and both he would do with vigorous abandonment! He spotted Gerard striding over to him and smiled easily. "Brother!"

"Renaud!" They clasped hands, happy to see one another again. "It hath been too long!"

"Aye, nigh on a year, if I am not mistaken."

"And thy holdings, they art finished?" Gerard asked.

"Aye, brother. It hath taken a while but 'tis nearly complete. Thy castle is impressive – 'twill keep out these Saxon rebels with ease."

"Aye. King William will be proud. Hast thou had much trouble thyself with the local Saxon rebels?"

Renaud raised an eyebrow. "Aye, but my men are stronger and easily outwit them. 'Tis an unruly land but my fortress is strong – no Saxon shall take it from me. Dunster hath six towers,

built with the finest stone. Thou shalt come and visit soon, I hope. 'Tis but two days' travel."

"Aye, and I shall be accompanied by my new bride. Come inside; she is waiting to meet thee."

Cynwise, peering from behind a stairwell, narrowed her eyes angrily as she watched the pair of them walk off. She had heard the portcullis rise and had wanted to see for herself what Gerard's brother looked like. Now she had seen him, she wished she hadn't. Handsome he might be, but he was also unbearably *Norman*!

He was of tall build, like Gerard, and just as broad-shouldered, although he wore his hair at shoulder length, unlike Gerard's cropped mane.

Unruly land, indeed! His accent was strong but, even so, she had understood him well enough to know he was criticising her beloved country.

The Saxons had been living very well before the Norman fools had decided to invade. Now, she found herself living in one of their castles, albeit against her will, and was having to be nice to them! Oh, if only Algar were here so they could sympathise with each other.

* * *

Elfreda blushed becomingly as Gerard introduced her to the handsome Sir Renaud de Clairvoy. He kissed her hand and smiled charmingly. "At thy command, my lady."

"'Tis a pleasure to make thy acquaintance, my lord. I welcome thee to Ilchester."

Gerard clapped him on the back and beckoned to a serf. "Will thee take a cup of wine, brother?"

"Aye. The ride was dusty, and my throat is parched."

Gerard handed him a goblet, and he drank a good draught before taking in his surroundings.

"Thy castle looks as fine inside as it doth outside, Gerard, and the lands look rich and plentiful."

"Aye, brother. With William on our side, we can conquer all!" He spotted Cynwise as she entered the hall. "Brother, come meet my future sister-in-law, Cynwise." He beckoned her over.

Renaud turned to find one of the prettiest women he had ever seen approach them. Her blue eyes regarded him steadily as he looked down at her.

Gerard introduced them. "Cynwise, this is my brother, Sir Renaud de Clairvoy."

"Good day, my lord." She bowed politely, but her eyes had a distinct chill to them. "I trust thy journey was untroubled?"

Frowning, he bowed his head and then levelled his eyes on her. "Aye, my lady. We were unmolested en route."

"Thee should take care when travelling across such an *unruly* land!" As soon as the words spilled from her lips, Renaud knew that she was mimicking his own from earlier, and he also knew where her loyalty lay—with the Saxons. He decided to play her at her own game.

"Aye, I said the very same words to my brother, earlier. It heartens me that as a Saxon, thee see the land as we do." He fixed her with a stare that clearly said he knew she had overheard him.

She flushed angrily. "Our lands were fine before the Normans invaded!"

Elfreda gasped. "Cynwise!"

Renaud simply laughed. "I hath heard worse, Elfreda. Be not fearful. She is fiery in her zeal, and her youthful innocence curbs not her tongue." He placed a finger under Cynwise's chin and made her look at him. Her eyes flashed back angrily.

"Watch thy words, Cynwise. 'Tis all very well amongst family, but be careful who might be listening."

"Thou had no fear earlier when thou spoke to Gerard!"

"Nay, and as the conquerors of this land, we do as we like. The Saxons will learn to abide by our law or suffer the consequences!"

Gerard had been quietly listening and decided to interrupt, before things became too heated. "Come, Renaud, Cynwise. 'Tis time Elfreda and I exchanged our marriage vows. Then we will hath a feast like no other!"

Elfreda smiled and took his proffered arm, thankful that he had dispelled the tense atmosphere. Renaud and Cynwise followed but refrained from speaking to one another.

* * *

The wedding was over as quickly as it had begun. Cynwise now had to accept the fact that Elfreda was married to a Norman knight. Whatever misgivings she had felt were now obsolete. Her sister was married, and there was nothing she could do about it.

Sitting at the high table, she grabbed a goblet and filled it with wine. Several platters of

food were laid out before her, but her appetite had all but disappeared. Most people present seemed to be enjoying themselves. But then they would – they were nearly all Normans.

She could hear Renaud laughing with his brother on her right, and to her left, one of the visiting Norman ladies was in deep conversation with the priest.

Wistfully, she thought back to only that morning, when she'd seen Algar. How would life treat her now that she was in this big, stone fortress? Would she ever see Algar again? Arrogant Norman bastards! Why did they have to invade their shores and ruin their lives?

As she began to drink, she became more and more annoyed as the alcohol entered her blood and fuelled her temper. She sat brooding quietly, until a deep voice interrupted her thoughts.

"Wouldst thou pass the wine, my lady?"

She blinked as her eyes focused on one of the causes of her troubles, Renaud de Clairvoy. She pulled the wine jug nearer to her and snarled. "Fetch thy own wine. I am not thy serf, thou Norman swine!"

"Cynwise, desist!" exclaimed Elfreda, visibly mortified that her sister would speak thus to her new brother-in-law.

Renaud tapped his fingers on the table, clearly vexed. "I never said thou art a serf. I merely asked thee, politely, to pass me the wine."

"Nay!"

* * *

Renaud quickly realised this was yet another battle of wills. If he let this pass, then she would continue in her quest to belittle him. Nay, he wouldst get her to comply by foul means or fair!

"I will ask thee one more time, and woe betide thee if thou dost not comply!" He leaned forward, his hand outstretched. "Pass me the wine."

He studied her, wondering how such a pretty exterior could hide such a precocious, willful wench beneath.

Cynwise leaned forward and said, "Nay!"

With a lightning move, Renaud pulled her from her seat and away from the high table. She squealed with fright and tried to fight him off.

Elfreda went to rise as Renaud flipped a protesting Cynwise over his shoulder and strode out of the hall, but Gerard stayed her with his hand. "Nay, wife. Cynwise hath behaved obnoxiously and will be treated accordingly."

"What will he do?" she asked apprehensively.

"Spank her, and before thee raises protest, I think thee will agree she is in dire need of chastisement."

Elfreda nibbled on her bottom lip. 'Twas true, Cynwise had behaved abominably. She only had herself to blame.

Renaud took the kicking and screaming Cynwise out into the inner courtyard where they wouldn't be disturbed. Quickly, he seated himself on a stone seat and pulled her struggling form over his lap.

"Thou art a stubborn, willful wench, and I will not be spoken to in such a manner!"

"Desist, Norman! Thou wouldst dare to spank me?" she exclaimed angrily, her voice ending on a high note as he threw up her skirts and revealed her bare bottom to his gaze.

"Aye, Saxon wench, and with much pleasure! Mayhap, 'twill still thy venomous tongue."

Before Cynwise could retort, his large hand began smacking her bottom. Instead of words, Renaud only heard shrieks—shrieks of outrage, mingled with pain.

Never before had a woman riled him so much. How dare she use his birthright as an insult!

Four hard smacks followed, the sound of his hand upon her tender flesh echoing throughout the courtyard.

He rained down more harsh slaps upon her upturned backside, relishing her cries as each smack made contact.

"Gerard told me thy parents are both deceased. In their absence, thee hath become most willful." *Smack! Smack!* "I shall see to it that thy tongue remains civil whilst I am under thy roof."

"Civil! What wouldst thee know of civility? Aow! Plundering another country to take what doth not belong to thee! Oh! Desist, that doth hurt! Prithee, I beg thee, no more!"

Three more smacks!

Despite her pleading, Renaud continued to mete out punishment until her buttocks were a deep, fiery colour. Only then was he satisfied that she had learned her lesson.

He pulled her upright, and she hopped from one foot to the other in front of him, rubbing her bottom to alleviate the pain. He noted with satisfaction that she scrunched up her face and was

on the verge of tears. "If thee ever call me a Norman swine again, remember this punishment. I will not stand for such insubordination."

* * *

Cynwise opened her eyes briefly and fixed him with a petulant stare.

"And take that look from thy face!" he demanded.

Quickly, she averted her eyes, knowing that if she continued, she could very well end up with an even sorer bottom than she now had. The man was a beast.

"Thee will go back into the hall, thee willst pour me a wine, and thee shalt hath a smile upon thy face."

He smacked her hands away from her bottom and propelled her forward with a small push. "Thou shalt not rub away the pain. 'Twill be a reminder."

Sullenly, Cynwise re-entered the great hall and did as he bid. He raised an eyebrow when she didn't smile as she handed him the goblet, so she gave him the briefest of tight-lipped smiles before walking back to her own seat. Her seat was thankfully padded, but even so, her bottom hurt as she sat down. She shifted uncomfortably and, there and then, vowed vengeance upon the Norman knight who had dared to spank her!

A few days later...

"Cynwise! Cynwise! The king hath come!" Elfreda rushed into Cynwise's bedchamber.

Cynwise looked up from braiding her hair. "The king? Here?"

"Aye!"

Quickly, Cynwise placed her wimple over her head and stood up. "How shall we greet him?"

"I know not, but we shall go together. He is already in the great hall with Gerard and Renaud."

Together, they entered the great hall and, with much trepidation, approached the king who had conquered their lands. He was fairly tall, although not as tall as the de Clairvoy brothers were, but he was strongly built. Cynwise guessed him to be in his early forties.

He eyed the two women with unabashed appreciation as Gerard introduced them. "Sire, my wife, Lady Elfreda de Clairvoy, and her younger sister, Cynwise Golderon."

The ladies curtsyed and stared at the king with big eyes. He laughed. "Thee both resemble startled deer. I do not bite!" He suddenly frowned. "Doth thee understand me? I cannot master this Anglo-Saxon language and only speak my native French."

Elfreda smiled. "We understand, sire. Gerard hath this past year instructed me in thy language. Likewise, I hath taught my sister."

"I congratulate thee on thy achievement. Would it that I could learn thy language so easily. Mayhap I am too old in the tooth!"

"Nay, sire," Renaud interjected. "There is no need to learn the language. These lands belong to the Normans now, and Norman French will be the spoken word."

Cynwise immediately bristled and went to offer a sharp retort but Elfreda squeezed her hand, signalling silence. She had to suffice with shooting a dark look at Renaud as he glanced triumphantly in her direction. She had avoided him as best she could since he had spanked her, but on the few occasions they had met, he never failed to rile her.

"Come and be seated by the fire, sire. I shall order some refreshments." Elfreda grabbed Cynwise by the arm and led her away towards the kitchens.

"Cynwise, prithee, I beg thee to keep a civil tongue in thy head. This is the king, not some lowly peasant," pleaded Elfreda.

"Tell that to Renaud. He aims to flaunt his Norman rule over me yet again."

Elfreda sighed loudly. "I know he doth but cannot thee ignore him?"

Cynwise closed her eyes briefly before opening them angrily. "'Tis hard, sister. Wherefore doth thou think I hath been resting in my chamber so oft? 'Tis to avoid that arrogant fool."

"Hush, someone will overhear thee."

"I care not!"

"Dost thou think the king will allow thee to show thy disapproval of his Norman birth?"

Cynwise shook her head and sighed, knowing she spoke wisely.

Elfreda continued, "Then hold thy tongue, I beg of thee." She turned to the kitchen staff and ordered them to fill several jugs with wine and ale, lay out a platter of their best meats, and fill a basket with seasonal fruit.

Whilst Cynwise watched Elfreda organise the refreshments, her thoughts turned to Renaud.

For some reason, when she had lain in bed last night and tried to dream of Algar, she had found herself picturing Renaud's face. He had even invaded her dreams, spanking her lustily as she cried out for him to stop but, strangely, wanting him to continue. She had awoken to find her heart beating rapidly within her breast and her breathing heavy.

She pulled a face. It should be Algar she dreamed of, not Renaud!

"Stop thy daydreaming, Cynwise, and carry these for me." Elfreda handed her a flagon of wine. The serfs followed with the well-presented platters of food, and they re-entered the great hall.

"How long doth the king intend to stay?" Cynwise whispered to her sister.

"Gerard told me nigh on a week," Elfreda responded. "'Twill be a testing time for us all, methinks."

"Aye." Her gaze settled on Renaud as he laughed with Gerard and King William. The easy sound set her heart fluttering. Annoyed at her reaction to him, she set the wine down and turned to go, but his hand stilled her.

"Cynwise, wherefore doth thou goest? Stay a while. The king hath a question for thee and Elfreda."

She looked at King William. He patted the seat next to him. "Aye. Come sit with me, ladies."

They both took a seat on either side and waited for him to speak. "Hath thee knowledge of a man called Wulfwynn the Bold?"

They both shook their heads. "Nay, sire. Who is he?" asked Elfreda.

"My spies tell me that he is a Saxon rebel in the process of leading a revolt against the Normans. He was last seen in this vicinity. 'Tis why I hath come."

"Thinketh thee, he wouldst make an attempt to gain control of Ilchester?" asked Gerard.

"I know not, Gerard. He could make an attempt on any one of our fortresses. Be aware and make ready thy men so that he will rue the day, should he try."

"Aye, sire. My men-at-arms art well trained. They will not fail me."

"As I thought. Even as we speak, I hath several scouts around the county, hunting him down. We shall hopefully find him afore he launches an attack."

Cynwise smiled slyly to herself as the king looked away. So, these Normans, who thought they could just march into England and take what they wanted, now found they were still under

attack five years later. The Saxons were not such an easy enemy to conquer, after all.

She suddenly felt a pair of eyes boring into hers and looked up to find Renaud staring at her disapprovingly as he noted her smile. She raised her chin defiantly and helped herself to an apple. Mayhap, Wulfwynn the Bold would overthrow the Norman rule at Ilchester, including the arrogant Renaud de Clairvoy. She could only hope so.

* * *

A few days later, Cynwise lay on the hill outside the castle grounds and watched Renaud practice his sword fighting with Gerard. They were a handsome pair and, reluctantly, she realised her sister had made a good marriage. The castle was strong and well furnished. Elfreda would be happy here with Gerard; he appeared to treat her well and saw to her every comfort.

But what of her own future? To whom would she marry? Her thoughts turned to Algar. She had not seen him for over a week and yet, peculiarly, she could not picture his face properly.

She dismissed him and all thoughts of marriage from her mind. She was young and, at the moment, content to have fun annoying the Norman lord. 'Twas amusing to see his face turn dark as thunder.

She lay on her back and stared up at the clear blue summer sky, a broad smile on her face. Aye, life was good. Marriage could wait.