

Chapter 1

“Hurry, Eleanor,” My father tells me in a hushed tone, panic evident in his voice. “You have to hide. The Norsemen are here. No matter what happens, don’t come out.”

I nod, rushing off to the loft of the barn as he instructed. I don’t know much about the Norsemen, but what I do know is not good. Everyone fears them, even my father, and he’s not afraid of much. I climb up, the straw poking on my bare feet and my legs, the thin nightgown I’m wearing doing nothing to protect my skin. Going to the very back, I climb behind a large pile of straw and pull some on top of me to hide.

The noise outside the barn is terrifying. I can hear the sounds of wood breaking, women yelling in fear and babies crying as shouts in a language I don’t understand ring out. I do know, however, that the sounds are growing louder as they make their way through the town towards our home.

My father never would have told me to hide unless he knew he couldn’t win a fight. The thought is sobering, especially as my mother died in childbirth years ago. I’ll be an orphan, though I’m at the age to marry. Who will arrange my marriage if both my parents are dead?

I can hear my dad yelling at someone to get out, to stay back, but he sounds so scared. There’s clanking and yelling, the sound of even more wood splintering and then, I don’t hear him anymore. I hope he ran. Please, God, let him have run. I know, deep down, that he’d never run from a fight, but I swallow down my fear, hoping that I’m wrong.

I try my best to stay quiet, but I can’t stop the tears and my breath shutters in fear as I hear the barn door open and heavy footsteps entering inside. I place my hand over my mouth, trying to muffle any sounds that may escape as I burrow into the hay as far as I can. Please, please, don’t climb the ladder, I will them silently.

I hear men’s voices but I don’t understand them as they speak among themselves, an occasional laugh coming from them. Finally, I hear the sound I had hoped I would not as the bottom rung on the ladder squeaks underneath someone’s weight. My heart thumps wildly, so loud that I’m sure they’ll hear it.

Creak.

Creak.

Creak.

The footsteps upon the old boards grow closer as the voice below grows quieter. They’re leaving. Maybe they’ll leave, too, seeing only the piles of hay up here. There’s nothing to take, nothing of value, at least.

Creak.

Creak.

They’re so close now. I hold my breath, hoping not to make a single sound in the deafening silence that now surrounds me when suddenly, I feel a strong hand on my ankle.

I’m quickly pulled up from my hiding spot and greeted by the sight of a large man. He’s huge. His dark hair is long, tied back like my own and his brown eyes shine at me. He brings a finger up to my chin, lifting my face as he peers down at me.

I want to scream, to kick, to run, but I’m frozen in fear as he smiles at me. It’s sickening, the look he gives me, as his eyes rake across my body. He says something, but I don’t know what as he roughly grabs my arm and he drags me to the ladder. Before I have a chance to fight him, he tosses me over his shoulder and descends the ladder as quickly as he made it up, calling out to, I assume, the people that were in here with his before.

He drags me out of the barn by the arm, calling out as people exit my home, their arms loaded with items that are ours. “No!” I cry out, pulling away from him, but his grip tightens as he laughs loudly.

“NO!” I yell again as I see a man exiting the house holding my mother’s golden candlestick. It was a gift for their wedding. We had sold many things to get by after her death, but my father could never part with it. “No! That was my mother’s,” I cry out, pulling as hard as I can, but I’m unable to break free.

The man holding it looks up at me through the long, blonde hairs that hang down as his piercing blue eyes meet my own, stopping me from any further protest. He looks at me, like he knows I’m telling him to stop, but he can’t understand me.

I feel a hand move across my body as I’m pulled back into the chest of the man who found me. “No. no,” I say frantically, trying so hard to get away from him, but he holds me tighter, laughing. His breath hits my ear, causing me to wince. “Please, no,” I beg as I feel his hand on my breast. “Help.”

The man holding the candlestick quickly comes over, yelling something that I don’t understand, but the man holding me stops moving his hands. A conversation ensues, and I don’t know what is said, but the man finally releases me, only for the blonde man with the beautiful blue eyes to grab my arm and push me behind him. He reaches in a bag hung round him and hands out some jewelry, no doubt they raided the monastery before they reached us.

The man nods and accepts them, turning to leave me with the new man holding tightly to my arm. He turns to me, pushing a stray red curl back from my face before taking my hand and pulling me to the house. He drags me inside, turning himself so I can’t see behind him, but I can see the blood on the floor. My father.

I look up to him, my lip quivering as our eyes meet again. He reaches to me and grabs the sleeve of my nightgown, motioning for me to stand more. I take him to the chest off to the side and open it, hoping that he’ll find what he wants and leave, but something inside me tells me to stay close, that he’ll protect me from the rest of them. Looking around, he grabs a blanket from the bed and throws some of my clothes inside it, tying it up.

He grabs my arm again and as he turns; I see my father laying on the ground and I freeze. “Daddy,” I whisper, trying to go to him, but a strong arm wraps around me and walks me to the door.

He’s taking me, I finally realize. He wasn’t stealing my clothes. He was packing them for me. My lips quiver as I look back up to him. I shake my head but he doesn’t let go of me. I reach back, pulling the blanket I had made from a deer’s hide for the winter. I had made it for my dad, a gift last year before the cold came, but he won’t need it anymore.

The man looks at me, taking in my bare feet and looks around until he finds my boots by the door. He holds them up to me, but I’m too scared to take them from him. He sits his blanket bag down and crams them in with my other items. He takes the fur from me, but I tighten my grip on it. Gently, he takes my steady hand in his and he pushes my fingers back to get me to release it before taking it and wrapping it around my shoulders.

A tear escapes and he lifts his head. I expect him to slap me, throw me to the ground, something- but he gently wipes the tear from my cheek before lifting me and carrying me from the only home I’ve ever known.