

## Chapter 12

**\*\*TRIGGER WARNING\*\***

This chapter contains infant death.

I wake with a start, hearing someone screaming for me. “Eleanor! Eleanor! Bjor!”

“Bjor?” I say, wrinkling my brow. I know this word, but I’ve learned so much in the past few days that it’s hard to keep straight in my freshly woken-up state.

Anders sits up and puts his arms together like he’s cradling a baby. A baby? Oh! It’s time for a baby! “Bjor!” I say to him excitedly and he returns my smile. He reaches up and cups my face, placing a kiss on my lips. I stand and toss a dress on top of my underdress and rush down the ladder.

Waiting at the bottom is Astrid, the young woman who helps Helga some, the woman who helped ME. She turns and runs towards town, and I follow, doing my very best to keep up.

When we walk into the hut, I see the pregnant woman from earlier today, sitting in the birthing area. She looks so worried, as does Helga. I guess the baby did not turn as they had hoped. There are women around, singing songs and burning herbs.

Helga takes my hand, pulling me off to the side. She gets a bowl and puts clean water in it. She pulls some herbs out and places them in the water. “For pain,” she tells me in her own language, and for a moment, I feel a bit of pride about nally understanding something. She dips a rag in and hands it to me, motioning for me to wipe the mother with it.

I cross the room, the women continuing their song, and kneel next to the mother. I take her hand and smile at her, not really sure what her baby being upside down means, but I know it’s not good from the looks on all the faces in the room. I wring out the rag and lift it to her brow, trying my best to do what I can for her.

It’s been hours and her pains are getting closer together. Helga pushes on the woman’s stomach and I’m pretty sure she’s trying to get the baby to turn around as the woman cries out in pain. She grabs my hand and squeezes it tightly and I happily let her, knowing that the feeling must be terrible.

Time passes and her pains get closer and closer. Eventually, she moves to her knees and bears down. Helga tries to help her, but she looks up at me with an unsure face. Something is wrong, I’m sure of it. The mother leans up and grips my arms, leaning her weight into me for support. I wrap my arms around her, doing my best to hold her up as she pushes, tears streaming down her face.

Push after push. Scream after scream. Worried look after worried look. Finally, with one last push, Helga lifts a baby, but he is not screaming like the one before. This baby is upside down and his face is not pink. His eyes are not open. This baby is not with us, not truly. I swallow down the tears that I feel trying to come as I help the mother sit back.

Helga lays the child down, rubbing his limbs, and blowing into his mouth, but he does not join us. After a while, she gently lifts the baby and hands him to the mother, a tear on her face and the woman lets out a scream. It’s a scream of pain, but not like when she was birthing him. This is a pain from the soul, a pain of loss. She holds him tightly to her, her tears falling on his face.

Helga looks concerned still, looking down at where the child once was. I move over to look and see so much blood. Gently, she takes the woman’s hand and begins to sing the saddest song I have ever heard. I don’t know what the words mean, but I know that the woman is going to die.

Astrid leaves and comes back with a man who rushes over, a worried expression on his face as he comes to the woman and takes her in his arms. He holds her in a way that is so caring, so loving. He gently kisses her head, pushing her hair back from her face. He takes his nger and runs it down the face of his son, his son who did not truly join us, tears running down his cheeks. All the while, Helga holds her hand and sings softly to her.

The singing stops and the man’s cries become louder, the pain of his loss evident in his voice. He lost his son. He lost his wife. I can’t help but wonder if my father was with my mother like this when she passed. In both places, men do not seem to join their women during birth. He was a good man, but did he love her like this man loved his wife? Will Anders love me like this?

Helga wraps an arm around me gently and leads me to the door, kindly dismissing me. I’m so thankful, because the loss, together with my thoughts, has suddenly become so overwhelming. I step out of the hut to nd Anders sitting on the ground, leaning against it with his head down.

He knows what has happened, it’s obvious from the forlorn look on his face. He looks up at me and reaches a hand to me and I eagerly take it, desperate for the comfort it provides. He tugs me towards him and down into his lap, wrapping his arms around me tightly as I sit in his lap.

I try not to, but it’s impossible, and the tears begin, falling rapidly down my cheeks as I sob. He’s unbothered by them, though, strong arms never wavering around me as he holds me tightly to him.

“Ost Mìn,” he whispers into my hair. “Ost Mìn.”

We stay there for some time until Anders places me on the ground and stands. I move to stand, but he doesn’t give me the chance, reaching down to lift me into his arms. I wrap my arms around his neck, leaning my head on his broad shoulders, and let him, not wanting to be apart from him for even a moment right now.

“Ost Mìn,” I whisper into his neck as he carries me back to our little home.