

Chapter 2

The man carries me towards the center of the village, the looting all but done now, as he stops in the center and places me on the ground. I look around, waiting for what's to come next, when he reaches towards his belt and unhooks something that looks like a silver hammer made of metal and places it on the ground. Grabbing a stick, he draws something in the dirt next to it with his finger before lifting me again and continuing on his way.

I look around and see neighbors and friends lying dead on the ground. It's so quiet. I just know that everyone else ran or is hiding, and I send a prayer that they made it somewhere safe, and they weren't followed.

We reach the edge of the sea and I see boats lined up where my father used to take me fishing. "Eleanor," he'd say seriously, "You're a lovely girl, but you need to know how to feed yourself. I don't want you to have to depend on a man for everything. What if something happens, and you're left alone?"

I hated fishing, mostly because I hated touching the fish, but I CAN catch a fish and cook it if I need to. I was hoping that would help me attract a husband soon. Father had told me he'd take my opinion into consideration when selecting, but I know my dowry isn't as big as others and after today, it's gone. Now, I have no options. No father. No dowry. Nothing.

The man carries me onto one of the boats and places me on the ground next to a small bench, handing me the blanket tied round my clothes. I nod in thanks and pull the fur blanket around me for comfort. I had always dreamed of seeing something outside my village someday, but this was not what I had hoped for. There's some yelling as more men and women, load into the boats before they start rowing, taking me from my home.

An older man comes up and looks at me, turning to say something to them. My blonde protector says something back to him, motioning to me, and that seems to satisfy him. They row for hours before they finally stop and pull up the oars.

He moves to sit next to me on the ground, reaching into his bag and holding out a piece of salted meat to me. "Thank you," I tell him and he wrinkles his forehead, but smiles a comforting smile.

He reaches his hand up to his chest. "Anders." Reaching out, he places his hand on my chest, a questioning look on his face.

"Eleanor," I say softly.

"El-nor," he says, trying to pronounce it correctly as he reaches his hand up and twists one of my curls around a finger.

"El-a-nor," I say again, trying to emphasize the syllable that he's missing.

"El-nor," he says again, a look of frustration on his face, like he just CAN'T say it right.

I smile at him. It's so nice that he's trying. I take his hand and place it on my chest as he just had when he asked my name. "Ellie."

"Ellie," he says, returning my smile. Something about the way he says my name makes me feel comforted, like I know he's going to protect me, wherever he's taking me. He turns beside him and reaches in his bag, pulling out a loaf of bread. It's still warm and I realize that while his friends were taking everything of value, he must have decided to grab food.

Did he kill someone for this? Does it even matter if he did? The boat seems to be loaded with many items of value. They couldn't have come just from my small village. How many people did he kill to get this?

Anders holds the bread out to me again and breaks off a piece, attempting to hand that to me instead. Timidly, I reach up and take it, unsure what it means for me. I knew the person who made this, whoever it was, but I need to survive. I take a bite, looking up at his piercing blue eyes.

The wind from being out in the open water causes me to shiver. I've never been on a boat, not really. From time to time, I would go out on a small one to help my father fish, but never really leave the shore. It was small, with barely enough room for the two of us. This boat, though, is huge and there's water for as far as I can see in any direction with no sign of land anywhere.

The deer hide blanket I had grabbed when leaving is pulled back from me and Anders places the old blanket around me, placing the hide back and shoving my belongings behind me. A man yells something and they all move back to the sides of the boat, beginning to row again.

It's been five days. Five long days on the boat. Five long days since I left my home. I'm not sure what I expected. I have no clue where exactly these Northmen are from, but I didn't think it was this far. How did they even find my village from so far away? How do they know how to get back?

Most nights Anders sits next to me, leaning his head back to look at the stars above in the clear sky as he would doze off. Tonight, it is much colder and cloudy. Tonight, Anders seems concerned, but I'm not sure why. He's pulled my belongings together and tied them into a dress instead of the blanket. He had me place another dress over the nightgown I've been wearing and wrapped the blankets around me tightly as it has become colder along our voyage. I shiver and he tries his best to tuck me in tightly to the blankets but as my shivers continue, he lifts the deer hide and pulls it over himself, pulling me to his side with his arm around me.

I've never been this close to a man, but he's so warm, and it's so cold, so I relax into his side as he situates the hide over us and leans his head on the top of mine. I know this is improper, but I'm really warm and he's been so kind to me. No one on the boat seems bothered by his actions. I'm not sure anyone has even noticed. Finally, I lean into him and fall sound asleep to the sound of his heart beating and his raspy voice saying "minn".

Chapter 3

Voices filled with excitement ring out loudly as the men in our boat look out to the left.

Anders looks up and over the side of the boat from where we sit still huddled together for warmth. He turns back to me, a smile on his face, before he stands and takes his seat again, preparing to row. I move over to the side where he was seated and look to see what everyone is so excited about.

Land.

It's not JUST land, though. There are houses, and buildings and people moving about. Of course, they're all happy. They are ready to go raid this poor village, too. As we get closer, though, I can see people coming out towards the water, seemingly unafraid. I want so badly to yell out for them to run, to hide. Have these people not heard the tales of the Norsemen? They're infamous, with their fleets of ships that come at night, attacking full of men unafraid of death.

It's home, I finally realize. They aren't afraid of them, because they ARE them. I look up at Anders as he continues to row and while everyone else seems unable to contain their excitement, he looks nervous.

They steer the boats into the dock and quickly jump out, unloading their treasures and embracing what I assume are loved ones. These men have seemed so terrifying to me but now, seeing them hug women and children seems so strange. All except for Anders. He doesn't leap from the boat nor does he even look around for anyone to hug. He lifts his heavy bag and gathers my things, offering his hand to me.

He steps from the boat, helping me out with so much care that it stops me in my tracks for a moment. This man kidnapped me, took me from my home, but he's so careful with me and so kind. It just doesn't make any sense.

The excitement around grows as they all head towards a large building ahead in the center of their village, carrying all the treasures with them. Anders speaks with a man and we follow as he holds my hand tightly. He stops outside the door, pulling me to the side.

He says something, but I don't understand, so I just shake my head. He says something else, but I still don't understand. Finally, he gently places his hands on my shoulders and leans down, placing a kiss on my forehead. He straightens himself to his full height, a scowl now on his face as he looks above me at the building. Roughly, his hand moves to my upper arm, and he drags me into the building with everyone else.

There are more people in here than I expected, and I suspect that everyone from the village is packed in here. Long tables with benches adorn the sides of the building with what seems to be food being prepared in the center over some kind of large fire pit. Flags hang on the walls with some kind of swirl design, the same that was on the ships. It would honestly be amazing if I weren't being pulled along so forcefully.

There's a man seated at the end of the room before everyone. He says something and holds his hand out, causing silence to come over the room. He must be the leader, as everyone seems to be hanging on his every word. A few different men speak to him and hand him items of great value. He smiles, taking them and placing them next to his seat. Multiple men approach, all handing items to him before kissing a ring on his hand and stepping back. Everyone has said "Jarl," leaving me to assume it's his name, and he holds great power among these people.

The man who found me in the loft approaches and speaks, kneeling before him. I'm unsure what is said, but the man turns and points towards Anders and me, the entire room turning to look at us. Anders pulls me forward, roughly tossing me to the floor. The kind man who saved me is gone, now replaced by this.

The two men speak, and not one word sounds familiar. The way they are looking at me is terrifying as Anders grabs my arm again and lifts me up to my feet with no effort. Jarl, stands and takes a step towards me. He smiles at me. Not in a way that is comforting, but in a way that sends fear down my spine. I try to pull away as he gets close, but Anders holds me in place. Jarl reaches out and touches the curls that are cascading down and over my shoulders in front, pushing them back before running a finger down my breast, trailing it lower.

Anders' hand shoots out and grabs his wrist and I can see fury on the man's face. Anders says SOMETHING to him and whatever it is, causes him to laugh along with the rest of the room. Jarl takes a seat again, while as he continues saying something, waving his hand in a dismissive fashion. Anders releases my arm, reaching into his bag and pulling out valuable items to present to him.

The man points at his bag and while he's hesitant, Anders hands it to him. He rips through the bag, taking out what he likes before tossing the nearly empty bag back to him. He slings the bag back across him and grabs my arm, though he doesn't squeeze, as he leads me to the back of the room.

I look up at Anders as he looks around the room intently. I don't know what to make of it. He was so kind to me, until he wasn't. And now, he still holds on to me, but it's not rough like it was moments ago. Still, something inside me tells me that he's my safest bet.

After some time, the people all disperse, going about their evening speaking to one another, laughing, hugging. There's even some singing, though I don't recognize any of that, either. A woman hands us each a plate. Anders reaches out to the platters before us and gives some to his plate, motioning for me to do the same. I'm unsure what any of this is, though, so I pick up some bread, the only thing familiar to me.

Anders takes a few bites but when he sees that I've only taken some bread, he offers a bite of his food. I take it, trying to timidly. It's warm and mushy- with some kind of meat and maybe a potato. I nod, trying to indicate that I like it. He must understand, because he reaches forward and places some on my own plate for me with a small smile.

Jarl takes a seat next to Anders. He tenses a bit and places his hand on my leg under the table. He doesn't grab it roughly and I find it to be some amount of comfort. The men stand and Anders grabs my arm once again, leading me out as he carries our things.

We follow him and he leads us to a barn. Opening the door, he leads us in and waves his arm around while speaking with Anders. He nods, and leaves us there, closing the door behind him.

Anders puts everything down against the far wall and suddenly he looks so tired, like he's been hiding it all evening and is finally able to relax. He looks at me, like he's trying to figure something out, but takes my hand and leads me to a pile of hay. He sits, tugging my hand gently for me to sit next to him and as I do, he reaches over and removes my boots. After removing his own shoes, he crawls back and lies down, motioning for me to lay next to him.

I guess this is where we're sleeping. I swallow. Hard. I've never slept this close to a man before until on the boat, but it's so cold here. I finally climb into the hay next to him and he holds his arm out for me to lay next to him but pauses, sitting up and unhooking the fur that he keeps over his shoulders. He lays it on the hay next to him, across his arm, almost like a pillow and gives me an unsure grin. As I lay down next to him and he holds me close to him, pulling anything we have over us to keep warm. I feel a sense that no matter how strange or odd, this is where I am supposed to be.