

## Chapter 7

I'm so warm and so comfortable. I squirm, not wanting to wake. Cracking an eye open, I find myself against Anders, his strong arms completely engulfing me in the safety of, well, him. At some point in the night, my hand had found its way under the hem of his shirt where it now rests on his very muscular torso.

Quickly, I pull my hand back, and thankfully it doesn't wake him. He really is handsome. And now that I've been told, it's obvious that he isn't from here. Most people here have dark hair and dark eyes. Don't get me wrong, they all look different from one another, but Anders stands out with his blond hair and deep blue eyes. And the two of us together really stand out, with my bright red hair. I'm used to that, though. My father told me my mother had the same hair, but most people in my village did not.

I wiggle from his arms, trying so hard to sneak out to go to relieve myself in the outbuilding before he wakes. As I push the blanket back and climb out, I see it there on the hay. Blood. "No," I whisper, shocked at the sight. Quickly, I try to gather up the soiled hay to remove it before he wakes, but I'm not fast enough.

Anders cracks his blue eyes open, watching me as I frantically try to hide the hay, knowing that it's going to be on my dress. I look at him, lip quivering as I can see the realization come to his face. He knows. He sits up and looks at me in confusion, taking my hands in his and smiling at me slightly. Perhaps he does not know that this is part of the curse of Eve, he doesn't know that I'm unclean now. I swallow hard as the tears spill over.

He tilts his head at me in confusion before he gets up and climbs down, leaving me in the loft all alone. I search through my belongings, trying my best to find something I can use, but I only have 3 dresses. The underdress I have on will be stained now. Perhaps I can just use that since it's likely ruined. I abandon my search and go back to pulling the soiled hay out, stung it into a bucket as Anders returns.

He sees me and comes over, placing his hands on mine, stopping me. Calmly, he helps me sit back and surprises me as he moves to pick up the soiled hay and sits the bucket to the side. He moves over and pulls out one of his shirts and hands it to me. I shake my head at him, not wanting to take one of his few clothing items, but he grabs his knife and slices through it, making it clear that I need to take it from him.

"I'm sorry," I whisper to him softly. He gently cups my face in his as he smiles at me and leans forward to place a gentle kiss on my lips. He looks back, staring into my eyes and leans forward, kissing my forehead. He brings his rough thumbs up and wipes away my tears before he runs one across my lips, leaning down to kiss me again.

He stands and picks up one of my newly washed dresses for me and hands it to me before he climbs down, leaving me alone in the loft. I bring my fingers up to my lips. He kissed me. He really kissed me. He cleaned my mess, unbothered by it and gave me his shirt... and he kissed me.

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After doing my best with Anders' shirt and changing my clothes, I climb down the ladder and find him waiting outside the barn for me with the older woman.

He stands when he sees me and smiles, taking my hand and bringing me over to her. He reaches out and touches my shoulder. "Eleanor," he tells her and she smiles at me.

"Olga," she says with a kind smile as she touches her chest. She says something to him that I don't understand and takes my hand, placing it in hers.

Helga tugs at my arm, pulling me behind her towards the fence around the farm. I turn back to Anders but he just smiles at me, letting me know that it's alright.

Helga and I walk down a path towards the village. On the outskirts is a hut and she pulls me towards it. As we approach, I can hear a woman moaning in pain and I look to Helga in panic. She places her hand on mine and pulls me toward it, not bothering to knock as we enter.

Inside, a young woman sits on some hay, no clothing on. She's clearly very pregnant and clearly in labor. She breathes deep, a woman behind her dips a rag into a bucket of water and wipes her forehead for her. The woman moves onto her hands and knees, bearing down with a scream.

Olga smiles at them, reaching over to me and placing her hand over my lower stomach. I don't understand, but I can't pull my eyes away from the woman working so hard to bring new life into the world.

A woman approaches us from the left, saying something to Olga and the two women smile. She looks me over, running her fingers through my hair and nods. Olga turns, leaving the room and as I turn to leave with her, she stops me, taking my hand and placing it in the new woman's. Anders wouldn't have sent me here if it wasn't safe, would he?

I'm pulled from my thoughts as the woman giving birth cries out, clearly in pain. The new woman takes my hand and pulls me towards a tub in the back. She reaches down and tugs my dress up and over my head. I attempt to stop her but she swats at my hand and pulls the dress off. She reaches forward and unties Anders' shirt from around me and guides me over to the tub of water, helping me in.

I sit as instructed, and she immediately dumps water on my hair, adding some kind of soap to my hair and scrubbing it. After she rinses it and is satisfied, she helps me out of the water and dries me off. She helps me into a piece of leather that's lined with some moss and shows me how to tie it on before she helps me into my dress and pulls me towards the woman still giving birth.

She taps the shoulder of the girl who has been wiping the mother's forehead, and she gets up to leave, handing the rag to me. I swallow hard, having never been close to a woman giving birth before, but I do as I had seen her do, wiping her forehead while she takes breaths. I notice that her neck and chest have sweat, so I wipe them too, and she squeezes my hand in thanks.

After some time, the mother moves onto her knees and holds both my hands in hers tightly, bears down and the babe nally begins to emerge. She looks into my eyes and I smile at her, knowing that she won't understand anything I could say as she bears down again as the older woman holds up a baby to her.

The mother takes the crying infant and brings her to her chest, sitting back and crying tears of joy as she holds her tightly. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do, but I bring the wet rag forward and begin to wipe the babe off. I look to the woman who delivered her, and she just nods encouragingly, so I continue to help her clean off the new life that has joined us.