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## Chapter 1

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*Norway, c. 900AD..*

She took a deep breath of the loamy, dank, sometimes acrid scents of the deep forest, happy to have found some time away from the village. And if truth be told, away from her father, who was busily pushing her towards Gorm Jorgensen every chance he got, nudging her in the ribs—gently but pointedly—and whispering about what a good bridegroom he would make.

Ase Oman frowned, then shivered at the thought. And how would her father know that? He hadn't known Gorm or his family for any longer than she had. The only thing he could see was that he was unmarried, and they were better off than his own family.

Not to mention the somewhat embarrassing fact that his eldest daughter was still at home at the age of eighteen, when her younger sister had already been married for a year. If she hadn't known that he loved her, she might have taken offense at how diligently he was working to get rid of her.

And her father was hardly the only one who kept reminding

her about her lack of status. There was something to be said when her mother was even less subtle than her father about the fact that not only was she still living there, but since she'd found something wrong with everyone else they'd brought to her attention, there didn't seem to be the possibility of a suitor on the horizon, either.

She knew she was obliged to marry. But she'd coyly managed to extract a solemn promise from her father that he would leave the choice to her, for which she'd been very grateful over the past few years. She didn't want to end up with someone from the village, whom she'd known all her life. Everyone who had been eligible when she came of age was married by now, anyway. The same went for the nearby villages, too.

Whomever she chose would be the man she would live with for the rest of her life—her husband, her lover, her protector. And Ase was determined that she was going to marry someone special and new and exciting.

Theirs was a sleepier, more agricultural town than their more aggressive cousins that could be found plundering the coastline at random, and it was the harvest fair, which was attended by people from far and wide, and where Gorm's family, the Jorgensens, brought many excess vegetables with them to sell, along with some of the bounty that their father, who had been a great warrior in his time, and his four enormous sons had been able to acquire from other villages far away. Ase took an immediate dislike to Gorm—although he was just a pest—but she really hated his father, who was a big, imposing man with a booming voice who, as far as she could see, was unpleasantly absorbed in himself. And as far as she could see from her time with him, he'd passed that awful trait on to his small, gangly son.

Despite his obvious wealth and bounty, his wife looked downright beaten down, in a way that her mother never once had. She was flighty and nervous, always looking to Harald for his

approval for everything she did, as if she were afraid of her own husband.

Gorm was the youngest—and the obvious runt—of the family, but he was obviously also much loved and doted on by everyone, even though his four older brothers all took after their father in size and stature, whereas he seemed to favor his mother in pretty much everything.

And he was very badly spoiled because of it.

Unfortunately for Ase, her father was perpetually on the lookout for a potential match for his daughter, and seeing the big, overfilled wagon, the four strapping young men, and the fine figure of a man who was obviously the patriarch of the family, her Fadir got that fevered, fervent look he always got when he saw a wedding in Ase's near future. He was even more determined that year than any other, and Ase had had to come to grips with the idea that she would likely be married one Friday before the end of the summer—quite possibly to a man she had not picked.

Shaking her hair out of its neat braid, such that the ends of it very nearly touched the ground, and loosening it with her fingers, she began to run lightly along the familiar path that brought her farther and farther into the woods she'd been running in like that since she was a child. She loped lithely along, so certain of her utter safety that she began to peel off her clothing the closer she got to her destination, and once she arrived, she was entirely naked, thoroughly enjoying the feel of the only slightly warm air on places that she owned that it usually wasn't allowed to embrace.

The little oasis, with its short but surprisingly beautiful waterfall and crystal clear, deep pool, beckoned her, even though—that late in the season—it was going to be even colder than it usually was in the heat and heart of the summer.

That was just a challenge she'd have to overcome. She'd spent the morning being forced to spend time with that silly boy and

blushing madly about it—not because she was some simpering lack-wit, but because of how embarrassing it was to be seen with him.

His four imposing brothers were already either married or betrothed. Ase was very glad to have found that out. Unfortunately, her father was much less so, but he had made it clear that he expected her to spend the morning with Gorm at the fair.

That young man might have been a part of a more prosperous family than she was, but everyone in her poor family knew how to behave decently, something that the loud, brash members of the Jorgensen family appeared incapable of doing, with the exception of the mousy matriarch.

Even though they'd brought servants—thralls—with them, they treated the merchants and farmers who were tending their stalls as if they were well beneath them, too, but many were willing to put up with such things in order to sell their wares or otherwise ingratiate themselves with the family.

They were only together for about an hour and a half, and that was more than enough time for her to know that there was no way she was going to marry that man. Ninety seconds had been long enough for her to come to that conclusion. She'd hate disappointing her father again, but it had to be done. She might be poor, but she still had pride in herself, her family, and her village. Gorm made rude—loud—comments about the people she introduced him to—people she'd known all her life, who actively tried to "help" her by praising her abilities to the man she was with, who utterly ignored them. He'd slapped Arvid—the hulking, simple man who wouldn't hurt a flea that everyone in the community knew and loved and took care of—when he didn't move out of Gorm's way fast enough for him, and blatantly stole food from the displays that he didn't really even bother to eat, while trying to get her to do the same.

Ase gave him a withering look that went right over his thick head. "I know the Svenson family. They grew that apple, and I

wouldn't take one from them without paying for it any more than I'd reach in and take food out of little Bjorn Svenson's mouth," she responded in as neutral a tone as she could manage. Ase found herself trailing after him, promising to make good on the loss herself to every merchant from whom he thieved and apologizing to the people she'd known all her life for his horrid behavior.

Arvid had dissolved into tears at having been slapped, but she couldn't see to him properly at the moment. Luckily, Liv Ulstrom already had her arm around him, comforting him as she gave him a small sweet, as one would a child. Ase sighed, making a mental note to make it up to him later, when she was—hopefully—free of Gorm.

As a result of her annoying companion, her cheeks had spent the morning a bright, heated red, which made the coolness of the water in the small pool just that much more appealing.

She'd never been so embarrassed in her life, and that was the man her father wanted her to marry? It also hurt to think that her father was so eager to get rid of her—that he considered her, essentially, expendable, even though she was the one who had taken care of her mother that winter when she'd gotten the fever, and she was the one who tended the gardens. She cooked and cleaned their small home without being asked, every day, and did everything she could to earn her keep—just as she'd done all along.

Why, all of a sudden, she had to be given away—sold, really, in consideration of the money that came to her bridegroom through the money or animals that comprised the heimanfylgia that her father would give him for marrying her—to a strange family, and worse, a strange man, to whom she would be expected to cede control of her life... and her body.

She closed her eyes, drawing another deep breath, that time filled with the comfortingly familiar scent of the water that was

in front of her, trying to force those troubling thoughts from her head.

After arranging her clothing neatly on a well-worn log, Ase stood at the edge of the far end of the pool, where it was deepest, launching herself into a beautiful dive that caused her to knife through the frigid water. Any colder, and she would have expected to see patches of ice floating on top of the water. Her nipples instantly became rock hard and ached with the cold.

But, just before she'd hit the water, she'd heard something disturbing.

A twig had snapped loudly, and she could tell that the sound had come from a place that wasn't very far away from the pool. It could have been a deer, she supposed, although most of them were much farther away from the town than that, driven there by centuries of successful hunting. So it was much more likely that it was a human who had revealed themselves to her in that way—one who had followed her here.

And she had an awful feeling that she knew who it was who would be so clumsy—someone who had never really been expected to provide for himself, and thus hadn't become a warrior or a hunter.

When she surfaced, she did so calmly and as quietly as she could manage, swimming slowly but steadily, to the only place along the shore that provided any privacy—behind two rocks, one large and one much smaller. The way the rocks were arranged allowed for a bit of a peephole between them, where one could observe without being observed.

"Ase!"

She would recognize that whiney, demanding voice for the rest of her life, even though she didn't intend to have to.

He was circling the pool as best he could, dragging a tree limb behind himself that would have made a very good walking stick, and avoiding doing any actual climbing. That kept her safe from him, since the end of the pool where she was required a bit

of exertion to get to. Her father had often teased her when she was a child that she was part mountain goat.

"Ase!"

At first, his calls were searching, beckoning, but the longer she refused to appear before him, the angrier he got, and the benign bellowing of her name soon took on a more petulant—and menacing—tone.

"Ase! Come here! I know you're in the water! I will not tolerate a disobedient female!" he yelled, actually stamping his foot in frustration at her.

She remained where she was, as silent as the rocks in front of her.

"I'm going back to the village, and I don't care how accomplished your stupid neighbors think you are! I'm going to tell my father that I wouldn't have you as my wife if you came with a thousand head of sheep!" He turned away as if to leave, then turned back. "I'll do it! I will! Then you'll end up with no husband, ever, because you're so willful and disobedient and stubborn. I've heard things—you're so old that your father is desperate to give you away to someone—anyone!"

Ase wisely kept her mouth shut. She'd heard that unkind things like that were said about her behind her back, but she'd brushed them off. But it stung to hear him say them, in particular, nonetheless.

Finally, after what seemed like forever, he left. But even then, even though she was trembling violently in the cold water while watching him do it, she didn't dare reveal herself until she was relatively sure that he was actually gone.

After giving him as much time as she could stand, she lifted herself out of the water as stealthily as she could, standing on feet into calves that were practically numb, which she quickly learned made her much less nimble than she usually was. And the nearly blue blocks of ice that resembled fingers didn't help her to keep her grip on the holds she needed to use, either.

But finally, she was atop the rock cropping that gave her a reasonable view of the path back to the village, and she could see him meandering his way back there, occasionally whacking tree trunks with the limb he'd found, mock fighting with others, but by now, he was well away from her. Even if he decided to look back for her now, it was unlikely that he would see her, although she knew she needed to get into her clothes as soon as possible, just to be sure. Her milk white skin was a beacon she didn't need him seeing, if only by chance.

Making her way back down was much easier than up had been, and seconds later, she was standing over her clothes. With no scrap of material with which to dry herself, Ase wrung the water out of her hair, then resigned herself to having her clothing sticking to her, and thus not providing much in the way of the warmth she needed, even as she put it on anyway.

The fabric of the under dress she wore was rough but sturdy. It wore well and was a quite serviceable, if unremarkable, green color. It had been one of her mother's dresses at one time and would likely last her many more years if she took good care of it. The beads her father and mother had given her as gifts for various occasions were strung between the straps, and alleviated some of the relentless green.

That dress caught at her damp bosom, and she sighed, deciding to put both dresses on and sort them out then.

The strap dress she pulled over her damp head was blue, her favorite color, and had its own set of broaches and a necklace, none of which were of anywhere near the finest quality. Indeed, they were very simple, even by the village's standards, but they were hers, and she loved them.

It, too, rested atop breasts that were still painfully peaked, awaiting her assistance in covering herself any further.

Ase grabbed the fabric of the dress that she'd donned first, and as she began to pull it down her body, she found—suddenly—that she didn't get very far.



Two hands—two very large, very male, very rough hands—cupped her breasts from behind, preventing her from bringing it down.

She was startled, of course, and had immediately opened her mouth to scream, but the sight of those hands occupied a part of her brain that was perseverating about the fact that they were definitely not Gorm's hands—which she might have expected and who she knew she could have taken in a fight from the time she was five—and nothing came out.

Before she could do anything more, she found herself lifted off her feet and brought to the closest thing to a secluded area near the pool, which was really just a thick bed of moss with lots of trees and rocks around it that provided a certain amount of shelter from prying eyes.

She had been trying to get away from him as he was carrying her. She was finally able to scream her head off, not that she thought that Gorm—if he heard her—would be any kind of help. No amount of wiggling or writhing did anything for her other than earn her a firm swat on her bare backside, which surprised her so completely that she actually did stop fighting him for a second, while her mind again tried to deal with what that strange man had done to her.

No one had touched her there in decades, since she began to wash herself rather than relying on her mother to do it.

It was definitely unpleasant and not something she'd ever wanted repeated, but it did make her feel more unsettlingly aware of who she was, where she was, and of her acute vulnerability.

She was a lone female—who might as well be naked—in the arms of a man who was at least as large as the Jorgensen patriarch and bigger than all of the brothers, too, she'd guess. The stark thought that she might well not survive that encounter took over her mind, rendering her mindless, and fighting like a wild animal to get away.

Why hadn't she brought a sword with her? Why did she feel she just had to get away, running into the woods like she had closer to five years than twenty—with no thought to her own safety whatsoever?

Her fingernails were worthless against the fur and leather he was wearing, not that her daily chores hadn't seen to it that she didn't have many of any length.

Ase knew that there was no spot on his body around which she could get her teeth, and they were really her only defense. Punching him—although she continued to do it—was hurting her much more than it was him, she knew.

As he put her down on her back on that moss, she could hear heavy footsteps in the woods, not just one set, but many more—more than she'd ever heard in her life—making their way with admirable quiet, considering what she would estimate to be the sheer numbers of them, towards a town that was concentrating on buying and trading things, rather than defending itself.

And it was then that Ase realized that they weren't likely to survive the coming encounter with their fellow Vikings, either.

In all of her attempts to save herself, all she succeeded in doing was tiring herself out, and he was obviously just letting her do it, ruthlessly—wordlessly—driving home the point of just how helpless she was against his strength.

Then he did something very unexpected, moving up and away from her a bit and undoing the clasps on the fur that covered his broad shoulders, which he then swept down onto the ground next to them before carefully moving her there, so that she was lying on a warm fur, rather than cold moss.

The little rabbit beneath him was shaking—even as she was also attempting to beat him to a pulp, if desperation was all it took to do so—so hard that Endre Carlson worried she would fall apart in his arms, and he'd be willing to wager that she didn't even know she was doing it.

Nothing that she could do to him would change the outcome

of their meeting in the least. And she'd soon tire of her futile attempts at escape, anyway, if his prior experience was any measure. In the meantime, he merely batted her hands away when they attempted to interfere with his pursuit.

There would come a point when he would relieve her of the ability to use her hands entirely, but that moment had not yet been reached.

He'd been making his way through the woods as silently as he could when he'd seen her running through them, away from the fishing town that was the target of their raid, and decided to follow her. When she started disrobing as she ran, like some wood nymph, he became even more dedicated to that task, holding himself ruthlessly in check and lying in wait when what he really wanted to do was to chase her down until he inevitably caught her, then fuck her until that deep, ever present ache abated, at least for a short while, anyway. But he knew it would be that much better if he took his time with her—in the capturing, and the fucking.

So, as she was running and undressing, he was trying to find himself the best spot from which to watch the show she was going to put on for an audience of one. He was aware of another person wandering through the woods who was also headed towards the pool, but he looked to be a small, untried—more importantly, unarmed—boy who still used a stick to pretend that he was a great warrior.

He was spending so much time watching her, though, that he wasn't watching where he was walking, and just as her beautiful body hit the water, he snapped a twig loudly underfoot. Endre spent the time she was underwater scrambling to a position of relative safety, from which he maneuvered to a place where he could both see what was coming around them, as well as see everything she had to offer.

While he was finding the best spot, the dolt he had spotted previously made his way to the water, and his hand went to the

hilt of his sword reflexively, but it was obvious that the kid was even less of a threat than he'd thought originally, spending all of his time with her whining about and at her like a spoilt child.

He did listen carefully to what he said, though, and it sounded as if parts of her family—likely her father—wanted them to be betrothed, and she didn't want to be. As much as he detested disobedience, based on what little he'd seen of the boy, he could hardly blame her. What woman would want to be stuck with a man-child for the rest of her life?

But if he was a potential suitor to that gorgeous woman, he'd have already dived in and joined her at the far end of the pool, giving her multiple, screaming, ecstatic reasons why she ought to reconsider her decision.

She handled him well by not engaging with him, and he'd shuffled off with understandable rancor and reluctance, while Endre's hand never left his sword the whole time. Not that he was concerned for his own safety, but he wouldn't hesitate to dispatch the boy if it looked as if he was going to try to pull something with the girl. He should probably have taken care of the boy immediately, but that would have revealed him to the girl, whose name was Ase, apparently. It was highly unlikely that he'd make it to the village—there were too many of them in the woods—and even if he made it to the town, he was such a donkey that he would likely be gone in seconds.

He intended to get more than just a taste of what he'd already seen before he rejoined the raiding party. She was much too beautiful a sight to resist.

Endre watched her sagely avoiding the boy, while spying on him at the same time, he'd noticed. Then he saw her begin to climb up around the rock outcropping, to its point, and he had to scramble a little to hide himself so that she wouldn't stumble onto him. She was still, even after what seemed like such an unwanted interruption, pretty blithe about her whereabouts and her state of undress, which connoted a certain amount of famil-

ilarity with that spot. But if she were his—daughter or wife—she would be getting a very stern lesson at the painful end of his thick leather belt about how unsafe it was for her to do things like that in the woods.

Since he could feel how cold it was now that he was holding her close to him, Endre was surprised that she'd gone swimming at all, but she might have been warm from running. She was an excellent swimmer, with all of that now dark red gold hair trailing behind her.

She was so small that she was barely an armful when he lifted her, and he could feel her shaking drastically as she tried to throw herself away from him as hard as she possibly could. He had to admire her tenacity—she continued to fight even after he'd put her down the first time.

But he'd noticed how she was trembling so hard, her bones must've been shaking within her—with her wet hair and wearing essentially nothing for clothing that covered any more of her than her shoulders—and something had quirked painfully inside him, as if someone had pinched his heart. That inspired him to doff his fur and move her to it. Endre wasn't even sure if he could explain why he'd done that to himself or anyone else, but there they were. He went even further once he'd gathered her and her flailing arms to sit atop her chest, bringing the sides of the fur up around them and cocooning them in its—and his—warmth.

"Get off me!" she yelled, realizing that, to him, it likely sounded much more like a plea. Her fists were immediately raining vengeance down on his shoulders, but she might as well have been beating the rocks around them.

Ase did not like the feral smile he gave her. It made her stomach hurt, and tears came to her eyes that she refused to acknowledge. There must be something she could do—she couldn't let that happen—she couldn't!

He was more than big enough to block out the sun as he

loomed over her, kicking her feet apart none too gently, as he laid himself atop her, his own legs forcing hers obscenely wide.

She immediately tried to close her legs again, of course.

"Leave them open."

It wasn't a plea or a yell. It was a command, growled from low in his throat—an unnecessary one. She couldn't have closed them if she'd wanted to; he was in the way. But it was much more important to him—and again, he wasn't sure he could say why—that she obey him.

To his surprise, her legs stilled immediately, while her fists continued to pummel at him, although much more weakly than at first.

He didn't try to stop her. He didn't try to kiss her. He didn't scream or try to intimidate her. Instead, he watched her face minutely as he moved just slightly to one side, and the next thing she felt was his hand cupping her exposed feminine parts with surprising gentleness. Endre almost smiled when he encountered their warmth—in contrast with the rest of her. He wanted to attribute their wetness to himself, of course, but couldn't rightly do so when she'd just gotten out of the water.

Suddenly, her entire body went still, and the eyes that had been avoiding his since he'd found her went comically round, and finally, she looked right at him.

Endre nodded slowly while whispering in a raw, rough tone, "Oh, yes. Keep your eyes on me, girl. I like to see your expressions..." His voice trailed off as he began to move his hand.

Ase tried to buck him off her or wiggle out from under him, but neither was possible. Still, like those hands until a few seconds ago, she continued to try to save herself, no matter how futile. It was as if neither her body nor her mind was going to allow her to surrender to him.

*At least, not yet*, he thought to himself, knowing that determined look as it overtook her fine features.