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# THE VIKING'S CAPTIVE

Vikings and Vixens

Book 2

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## Prologue

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**S**outh of England, Winter 1019

"So, is he the one?"

The abrupt question brought Brenna to a skidding halt. Desmond had asked her to join him in the great hall as a matter of urgency but had failed to specify why. What was sure was that she had better not keep him waiting.

Her heart skipped a beat when she saw that they weren't alone. The room was filled with at least two dozen men. Instantly, her eyes lowered to the floor. It never boded well for them to meet in front of his advisors. Somehow it always ended up in disaster. Either her betrothed flew into a rage because she didn't contribute to the debates to his satisfaction, or his senses became heated when the men complimented him on his choice of bride and he dragged her to his bedchamber to have his way with her.

That was by far the worst of the two alternatives. His displeasure left her cold but having to endure his attentions made her flesh crawl.

"The one?" she asked, her gaze focused on the flames dancing in the firepit. What was Desmond talking about now?

"The man who was abusive towards you and Eadgifu the other day," he answered irritably, as if she was being deliberately obtuse. She wasn't, only she was surprised to see that the incident was still in his mind. He was not exactly the thoughtful, protective kind. She, who'd had to resign herself to the fact that she would be married to a man who cared nothing for her, should know. That he remembered what she had told him a week ago, was enough to render her speechless.

Knowing an answer was required of her, she cautiously looked around the room and blinked.

Yes, the man standing in the middle of the room was most definitely the one.

The one she had been unable to forget.

With icy blue eyes, long blond hair braided in a striking, exotic style, a strong body, and unsettlingly abrupt manners, the Northman was not someone you forgot in a hurry, if ever. But it was not his spectacular beauty that had taken her breath away, but rather, the way he had looked at her. Indecent, possessive, unapologetic. As if he owned her and she was his to undress with his eyes, then with his hands, and finally stroke every inch of her body until she swooned. As if she belonged to him, and he had every right to sit her across his lap, spread her legs wide and plunge deep into her while he nuzzled at her breasts and made her...

A cough by her side jerked her back to reality and informed her that Desmond was still waiting for an answer. He was not a patient man so she had better not ignore his question lest she pay for it later.

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"We met the other day, yes," she admitted, keeping her eyes in the distance so as not to betray the interest the handsome stranger roused in her.

They had met when she and her friend Eadgifu had happened upon a group of Northmen during an outing a few days ago. The village beyond the valley, which had been abandoned for some time, had been bustling with activity that day. Curious, the two ladies had ridden towards it. By the time they had realised that the men going about their business were not Saxons, as they had assumed, but Danes, it was too late. They had been encircled by a horde of fierce-looking warriors.

In other words, enemies.

True, these men had not come as part of a raiding army, intent on plundering the land and raping the women, but that was not enough to calm their fears. Even without axes and shields, they still looked like a menace and far too capable of overpowering the two unarmed females foolish enough to venture into their midst.

One of them, evidently a leader of sorts, had come to speak to them. Even though she was on horseback Brenna had felt dwarfed by his presence and not a little flushed because he was... well, he was stunning, the most handsome man she had ever seen.

"Wh-what are you doing here?" she'd stammered, eyes locked onto his crystal irises. Eyes such as these could keep a woman captive forever and she wouldn't even mind it.

"What does it look like?" the blond stranger answered, tilting his head. "We are moving in."

Yes. It was a rather stupid question, she had to admit, but her brain refused to function correctly, which was no wonder. In the presence of such masculine beauty, her powers of concentration were addled in much the same

way one's vision was hampered when they tried to look directly into the sunlight.

"Do you think you could address us more politely?" Eadgifu asked somewhat crisply.

"The lady asked me a question and I gave her the honest answer. How is that not polite?" The man crossed his arms over his chest without letting go of the hammer he was holding. His tunic sleeves were rolled up to the elbows and Brenna's throat went dry. My... His forearms looked nothing like Desmond's and there was no doubt as to which she preferred to gaze upon.

"Your tone, I'm afraid, is not..."

"Please," Brenna interposed, smiling in Eadgifu's direction. Evidently, her friend was impervious to the man's appeal. She was looking at him as if he was a slimy bug she wanted to squash under her boot. How could that be? Surely, the woman had eyes? "We have no quarrel with you or your men," she said, looking at the Northman once more. "We only rode here because we were surprised to see the abandoned village bustling with activity and wondered what had happened."

"Humph, yes. And why exactly was the village abandoned in the first place?" Her friend refused to be cowered.

Brenna could not help a sigh of exasperation. How disappointing when someone's true colours were exposed and turned out to be ugly shades of malice and prejudice. It was perhaps understandable that Eadgifu should be wary of Danes, considering what had happened to her family a few years ago, but these men were clearly not here on a killing mission. They were no more to be blamed for what had happened then or feared for what they might do now than she, Brenna, could be held responsible for Desmond's inability to protect the people living on his lands.

"I have no idea why the village was left in such a state of disrepair," the Northman had the gall to say, looking deep into Eadgifu's eyes. Unsurprisingly, the woman paled, realising that she had perhaps bitten off more than she could chew. Brenna could not blame her. The man didn't look like someone she wanted to cross. "Would you care to enlighten me, my lady?"

"The... I mean... Your army of heathens invading our country time and time again..."

"Are to be blamed for destroying the village, it is agreed," the Northman finished for her when she floundered. "That was years ago. Now my friends and I will be the ones restoring it to life. Do you have any objections to that?"

The tone was now unquestionably too sharp to be polite and the gleam in the blue eyes might have worried Brenna had she not been on a horse and able to flee in moments. Mercifully, she could rely on her mare to whisk her away to safety if need be. Formidable as he was, the Dane would not be able to outrun a horse, surely? Perhaps not. But he might well throw his hammer and knock her off the saddle before she had time to blink.

"We will even repair the broken water mill, something that should have been done years ago, and till the fields. The whole area will benefit from our efforts, surely you can see that," he added, glaring at Eadgifu.

"We do," Brenna said hastily. Indeed, they were not taking over; they were peacefully settling into a place where no one had wanted to live for years. What harm could it do? She nodded towards Eadgifu. Thankfully, the woman seemed to have realised that her stubbornness could land them into trouble and didn't say a word. "We will leave you to carry on."

Blue eyes skewered her. Far from being appeased, the

Dane looked about to smash his hammer into her skull. "I am gratified that you granted us your permission to do so, my lady. Not that it is yours to give in the first place. Know your place, or I will make sure you do not forget it ever again."

*Know your place!* Really? Brenna sucked in a sharp breath. How dare he talk to her in this way! To think she had taken his defence earlier!

"I..." The words refused to come out. The man's lips quivered. He was enjoying her discomfiture! She tried again. And failed again.

There was nothing to be gained by staying any longer, save further embarrassment. She refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing her flounder. A moment later, she was galloping away from the man, glad that the thunder of hooves covered the wild beatings of her heart.

"You said that the Dane spoke our language," Desmond said, taking a step closer to her, bringing her back to the present. Brenna shivered. She had to focus and stop her thoughts from wandering down dangerous memories or lewd musings! If her betrothed suspected the effect the Northman had on her, he would not be pleased. That he cared nothing for her, didn't mean that he would happily let her take an interest in other men.

"He does speak our language." She had not forgotten how his every word gave each sentence a rough, sensual edge.

"Well, he doesn't appear to. No one has managed to make him utter a single word since we caught him. I am not even sure he understands what we are saying. Are you sure he's the one? Could you not have mistaken him for another of these barbarians?"

Brenna almost gave a snort. Mistake him for someone



else? As if she met men like him every day! As if she would not see the difference between a stallion and a rouncey at a glance! As if she wouldn't know her right hand from her left without even looking!

Though she knew it was unwise to do so in Desmond's presence, she could not help stealing a glance at the man. His blue irises, full of pent-up resentment, pierced her. He had recognised her as well, that much was clear, as much as the fact that he was not going to utter a single word in his defence, as if he wanted to see how far this farce would be allowed to continue. He was glowering at her, but this time there was no talk of teaching her place. Which didn't mean he was tamed in the least. He looked as defiant and commanding as he had the other day.

"Yes, I am sure he is the one," she said in a breath.

"You heard her," Desmond said to the men assembled in the room. "My betrothed has identified the man as her aggressor."

*Aggressor!* Brenna inhaled sharply. That was too strong a word by far. For certes, the man had been unusually abrupt and mocking, but he had not harmed her, or even touched her. Why did Desmond think she had been attacked? Had Eadgifu reported the man's words and made him appear far more dangerous than he had been? It was possible. It was obvious that she would like nothing more than to see the back of the Northmen. She might well have lied about what had happened in the village when questioned by Desmond.

Oh, why had Brenna felt the need to tell him about it in the first place? She should have kept silent about the whole episode, but for a reason she could not quite understand, she had needed to talk about the man to Desmond upon her return from the village, in the same way she

couldn't help worrying a scab forming over a wound even when she knew it was wrong and might well end up leaving a scar. Her meeting with the man was like a dark secret she could not help but share with the world, just for the pleasure of prolonging the moment and giving it some semblance of a substance.

But somehow in her confusion, she must have given Desmond the wrong impression if he thought the man had actually attacked her—or Eadgifu had unleashed her venom and painted him as a dangerous lunatic. Either way, she had to rectify the situation.

A murmur of disapproval crossed the room. A few men took a step towards the Northman. Only now, did Brenna realise that his hands were tied in front of him. Because she had not wanted to betray any unseemly interest, she had carefully avoided looking at him. But now she realised that he was here not to be questioned, but to be punished.

"Wait, Desmond, there must be a..."

"Fear not, my love, we will not distress you further by recounting the nightmare you revealed to me. But you will be gratified to see the man who despoiled you punished for his crime."

Despoiled? Nightmare? Punished? What on earth was Desmond talking about? And since when did he call her his love? He had never pronounced a single word of endearment in her ear when taking possession of her body, much less in public!

There was no time to say anything. At their master's signal, four men jumped forwards.

Quick as lighting, the Northman turned around and headbutted the man to his left, who fell to the floor without a sound, his nose reduced to a bloody mess. But fast and strong as he was, the Dane was alone, and his wrists were bound. He did not stand a chance. Before Brenna had

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recovered from the shock of the brutal attack, he lay on the floor, unconscious.

The scream of horror got stuck in her throat.

"There. Justice is done."

She could only stare at Desmond in stupefaction.



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## Chapter 1

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**T**he cell would have been pitch dark were it not for the slivers of light filtering through the badly joined stones in the wall. Thankfully, Brenna had thought to bring a rush light with her. She walked in gingerly, expecting the Northman to snarl at her at any moment.

When he didn't move, her worry for her safety morphed into concern for his welfare.

Had he died? It was not impossible. After the beating he had received, he might well have bled to death in the time it had taken her to get to his cell. Or he might have broken his neck when the men threw him on the floor with as much care as they would show a rabid dog. No one would have tended to his injuries, that was for sure. Which was why she had come.

She placed her rush light on the floor and knelt by his side to observe him more closely. His hands were still tied in front of him, his eyes closed, his breathing laboured. In all probability, some of his bones were broken. She had brought a knife to untie him and a wineskin to offer him a

drink, but if he was not even able to swallow, what could she do? She had not anticipated she would find him in such a sorry state. And then, while she was pondering on the best way forward, he stopped breathing altogether.

"Oh no!" she whispered in panic. Was she too late? Was his heart still beating? There was only one way of knowing. She leaned in to bring her ear to his chest.

Before she had time to hear anything, two hands whipped around her neck, securing her against an iron-hard chest. The rope binding his wrists pressed on her nape, pinning her in place. She was trapped, at the mercy of a man who could snap her in half with a flex of his arms, a man who had threatened to show her place when she had done nothing more than grant a permission she had no right to grant, a man who had every reason to harm her now that he thought she had named him as a rapist. Never, had she been in more danger.

And yet, all she could think of was that he smelled divine, of pine and virile male.

She tried to speak and only succeeded in make a croaking sound.

"I'm not dead yet, Saxon," the man growled in her ear, all menacing intent. "And you're not going anywhere."

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It had worked.

Björn gave a growl of triumph. He had managed to trap the silly minx. When she had knelt next to him, so foolishly close to him, he had not believed his luck. Not only had she come to his cell alone and unprotected, but she had placed herself within catching distance. The idea was not long in forming in his mind. If she thought he had stopped breathing, she might well lean in to make sure.

She had.

And he had pounced.

"Listen to me, Saxon," he ordered, making no effort to hide his fury. A woman who had accused him of raping her did not deserve to be shown any consideration. If she was scared of what he might do to her, then so be it. It was no more than she deserved. Besides, he wasn't sure he would not hurt her if she tried to deny her role in the whole affair. "First, you will free my hands, and then you will get me out of here, do you hear?"

"It will be impossible to get you past the guards." Her voice was little more than a gasp.

"I'm sure you will find a way, because if you don't, then you are of no use to me and I will kill you. I will choke the life out of you right now," he warned, icy deliberation flowing in his veins. "Don't think I won't because I will. I have nothing to lose. I have already been accused of assaulting you so I might as well be punished for something I have actually done."

She gave a croak and tried to wiggle away. A snort escaped his lips. Did she really think she could break free from his hold? He tightened his grip and she stopped struggling instantly.

"Please, you are hurting me!"

He knew that the ropes holding his wrists together would dig into the side of her neck. It had been the only way to immobilise her, but it was surprisingly efficient. The only drawback was that the unexpected intimacy of the contact had provoked highly unwelcome stirrings in his loins. The woman was sprawled on top of him, with her head cradled against his chest. Her weight barely registered and he could not help but relish the feel of her against him, especially when she was trying to struggle. It was an intimate, highly provocative position to share with a

woman, one only lovers ever found themselves in. Well, lovers and prisoners and their captors apparently.

Björn closed his eyes for the briefest moment. His mouth was buried in her unbound hair, and he realised that she smelled divine, a floral, yet deep smell he could not quite place. He had the odd impression that he would never forget that scent as long as he lived. Did she smell so good everywhere? Were the hairs between her legs as wild and fragrant as the mane on her head? Would she moan if he buried his nose in it and grabbed her by the hips to draw her closer?

"I know I'm hurting you," he growled, pushing such distracting thoughts out of his mind. "That was the idea."

Hurt, or rather, impress upon her that she had better take him seriously. Despite this, he released his hold marginally. The girl took in a deep breath, then another, causing her breasts to press even closer to him.

"So, have you changed your mind? Do you think you can find a way of getting me out of here?" he asked.

"I-I will try."

A corner of his mouth lifted. Clearly, with the right incentive, everything was possible. "Good girl."

She stayed silent for a long moment. He waited, wondering how they could feel so good together.

"I have a dagger here with me," she said eventually. "If you set me free, I will cut your ties."

Even better. He had imagined she would have to work hard at loosening the knots. If she had a knife, he would be free in an instant. Or... or he would be dead.

"Why did you bring a dagger with you?" he asked, narrowing his eyes. Had she intended to kill him in his unconscious state? Was that why she had got so dangerously close to him? "To cut my throat while I was unable to defend myself?"



"No! I would never do such thing." Despite her precarious position, the girl managed to sound outraged; quite a feat, he had to admit. "I meant to help you. Why do think I came here?"

"How would I know?" he snorted. He had been wondering that exact same thing. When the door had opened on her slim figure, he had thought for a moment that he was dreaming, or that fever had finally overpowered him. But no, a woman *had* entered his cell, a woman with a mass of hair such as he had only ever seen on one person before, on the Saxon who had walked in on them as they were getting settled in the abandoned village a few days earlier.

The Saxon who had then run back home like a scared rabbit and told her husband that she had been raped.

Hatred surged through him. Who would have thought that her beautiful exterior would hide such a nasty, vindictive soul? He could have believed such a thing of her awful friend, but her? During their conversation, it had seemed as if she was ashamed by the other woman's attitude towards him, but evidently, she had shared her opinion, only she had lacked the courage to confront him, instead running back to her husband to complain about the horde of heathens taking over their land and destroying their peace of mind.

Well, he would not be blinded by her beauty any longer. A gilded, shiny sword was just as lethal as a plain, rusty one and he was not going to stand idle while it struck him.

"Why are you here if not to finish me off?" he barked. Had she come to goad him, safe in the knowledge that the mighty Dane was tied up and harmless in his cell?

"I came to help you," she answered, speaking with her mouth against his collarbone. The movement of her lips

felt almost like a kiss. "I thought you would have understood that. I have no other reason to be here. Please let me go. I promise not to hurt you."

"You had better not. If you try anything with that dagger of yours, other than cutting my ties, I will make you pay for it, do you hear?" he hissed. "My hands may be tied, but I can still use my legs, my head, and my mouth. You will regret it."

He felt her swallow against him as if she had interpreted his words in a different way. His groin tightened because, out of nowhere, the ideas he had tried to suppress started to explode in his mind. Yes, he could well use his mouth on her, his lips, his tongue... The girl was exquisite, for all she was a viper, and he'd been struck from the moment his eyes had landed on her.

In the last few days, he had spent his time thinking of the impertinent little Saxon, and he had remembered everything about her.

Her hair. He had remembered the mass of fiery hair with coppery strands running through it. Her eyes. He had remembered her mesmerising eyes, how they seemed to change colour with every emotion agitating her. Annoyance at her friend had lent a dark edge to them, making them appear as deep as emeralds, but at the beginning of their conversation, they had been a pale jade hue, becoming almost transparent when she had eyed him up and down in undisguised appreciation. How would they look at the height of pleasure, he wondered, or when her face was flushed with humiliation?

He was dying to know. He *would* know. Soon.

At first, he had wanted to teach her haughty friend a lesson for assuming he was a violent invader. But the sour-faced witch wasn't here now and although she had been scathing that day at the village, she was not the one

who had accused him of rape and got him almost killed for it, Desmond's wife was! And so, he did not merely want to teach that scheming little Saxon a lesson and show her place, he wanted to make her crawl and beg for his forgiveness. He would enjoy seeing her squirm. But all this would have to wait. First, they had to get out of here.

He lifted his hands slowly and released her, watching her for sudden movements. She slid from his body and spent a long time by his side, panting and moaning, and the noise did not help him regain composure. She sounded just like a woman winded after an energetic bout of love-making, one of the most delicious sounds in the world.

"Do you mean to cut my ties sometime today?" he growled, annoyed at himself for his foolishness. Why should she, of all people, stir his desire?

She scrambled back to a sitting position and lifted her skirts, affording him a glimpse of her slender leg when she retrieved the dagger she had slipped in her garter. A curse escaped his lips when the sight of her thigh caused his half-erect member to rise even further. Why couldn't she have tucked the weapon in her belt?

"Get on with it," he ordered, lifting his bound wrists to her.

With a deft move, she sliced through the ropes. As soon as his hands were free, he took the dagger from her and pointed it at her throat. She froze, her eyes huge in the moonlight. Transparent, he noticed with interest. Ah... So she was not just afraid, she was also aroused...

Interesting.

"Are you going to k-kill me?" she stammered, shuffling backwards.

"No. I do not kill people who can be of use to me," he answered, lowering the weapon. He had made his point

and was certain she would not overpower him now, even if she had somehow secreted an axe in her bodice.

"What use can I possibly be to you?"

A slow smile crept up his lips. "I can think of several," he said, allowing his gaze to roam her slender form. She really was exquisite, and at any other time, he might well have made use of her tempting body. "But right now, there is only one thing I want from you."

A croak escaped her lips when he took her arm to draw her close to him. "No, I-I don't want to..."

The little liar! She might hate it and try to convince herself that what she felt was merely fear, but deny it all she want, she was aroused by him. Björn had seen enough women reacting to his proximity to know exactly what was happening within her. She was melting.

"I think you do," he stated, sure of himself. "But that is not what I want from you right now. As I said, you are going to help me escape from this place."

"I am not sure it will work."

"There is only one way to know for certain."

Grabbing her by the elbow, he led her towards the door.

"Why didn't you tell the men you spoke our language?" the girl asked him. "You could have reasoned with Desmond, explained what really happened?"

"Could I? Do you really think he would have believed me or even listened to my explanations?" Björn shook his head. The men who caught him at the village hadn't been sent to ascertain the situation. It had quickly become clear that they were under strict instructions to ignore his protests and capture him no matter what. He was going to serve as a scapegoat, whatever he said. It would be his word against that of Desmond's pretty wife. "He wants me and my friends out of the way."

"Why?" she asked, rubbing at her neck as if to ease the pain caused by the ropes. It was a surreptitious gesture not aimed at him, which surprised him. Surely, she should have tried to make him feel bad about hurting her? Perhaps because she behaved with unexpected dignity, Björn did feel a sting of guilt at his actions. His hold had been strong, and she was only a slight woman.

He crushed the unwelcome feeling before it could take root. She had only herself to blame for whatever pain he had caused her. He certainly hadn't forced her to accuse him of rape or to come to his cell without a proper escort.

"Perhaps you should ask your friend why anyone would want us out of the way," he told her. "To some people, we will never be anything else than invaders, cruel barbarians intent on destruction. I cannot even say that I don't understand why. It is obvious that your Desmond wants us gone from here, but he doesn't have the authority to send us away, the men to dispose of us, or even the courage of his opinions. He thought that if it became known that you had been assaulted, others would come to his aid, demanding retribution against the horde of Northmen and that with me gone, my men would think better of settling in the village."

He made an irritated gesture. Why was he wasting time explaining her husband's motives to the woman? She was probably privy to them anyway. After all, without her accusation, he would never have been able to put his plan to execution. She had to be working with him.

"Now, take me to the stables," he ordered, putting an end to the discussion.

"No."

He arched a brow. "No?"

Had she truly just said that? Something surged within

him, something like satisfaction. Oh, now she was asking for it.

In the blink of an eye, he had brought her flush against him.

"Listen to me and listen well. I do not take no for an answer, *ever*," he growled in her ear. "Not from my friends, not from my women, least of all from scheming Saxons. You will take me to the stables, make no mistake about it, and get me out of here before this night is through." He placed the dagger at her throat to emphasise his point.

From the whimper that reached him, it was clear she did not realise that he would never actually hurt a woman, much less slice her throat in cold blood. Good. She didn't have to know that. If she feared him, she might stop being so confrontational. Not that he disliked it per se... The iron-hard length in his breeches clearly said that part of him, at least, found her defiance invigorating.

Still.

There was no time to think about that now; he needed her to comply. Everything could wait until after they had escaped. Then he would be able to do what he wished with the little Saxon.

He nudged her forwards. "Shall we?"