



The Bear and the Bride

Jianne Carlo

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Chapter One

Stjórardalr, Norway A.D. 1028

“Ye have been married afore,” Martha said, then cursed when a knot in Ainslin’s waist-length golden curls refused to unsnarl. “It’ll no be a shock, the doing of it.”

Ainslin gently pried the comb from her nurse’s arthritic fingers and didn’t bother to point out the obvious differences between her current marriage and the last. “Warm yourself by the fire, Martha. I’ll tend to my hair. ’Twas chilly in the hall during the *náttverðr*.”

Aye, frosted more described the tone the jarl’s sister used when she had spoken to Ainslin during the interminable evening repast the Vikings termed the *náttverðr*.

“Tis better the ladies o’ the house don’t tend to ye,” Martha muttered. “The new master’s sister is no to my liking. She has the evil eye, does that one.”

Ainslin repressed a sigh at the truth of her words.

Helga, stepsister to Torsten, Jarl of Stjórardalr, hadn’t addressed Ainslin more than thrice since her arrival two evenings before. The clipped replies to the few queries she’d ventured had quelled her last hopes of making this union a happy one. Ainslin stared at the dancing flames in the hearth and drew the carved ivory comb, a present from King Cnut’s handfast wife, *Ælfgifu*, through her hair.

Twice she’d been married by proxy; twice she’d not met her husband until her wedding night. Commanded to marry the man warriors referred to as the *Norðanverðr Bjarndýr*, the Northern Bear, by King Cnut, Ainslin and Martha had journeyed by land and sea three sennights before setting foot in the longhouse known as *Bjarndýr Skáli*, Bear Hall.

“He’ll no expect a bloodied sheet.” Martha gathered the sewing Ainslin had been working on earlier, two new tunics for her twins, Brom and Rob.

And ’tis the crux of the matter, for ’twill be a bloody sheet unless I find a way to...

To what she knew not. For the last part of the journey, she'd worried and fretted, not knowing how her new husband would react to her unbroken maidenhead. Briefly, she'd considered taking a lover, but whom? One of the guards? They were all the jarl's men. An innkeeper? She shuddered remembering the missing teeth of one, the stench of rotting fish on another, the manure ground into the furred forearm of the last hostel owner.

Her current predicament was the result of her first husband's, Hadrain's, kindness and age. None knew or suspected her last marriage hadn't been consummated, not when she stood the proud mother of two dearling sons.

"My lady," a soft voice called, and a muted tap sounded on the hut's door.

"Enter." Ainslin set down the comb and folded her hands together, steeling her spine for the inevitable announcement.

The serving girl, Thora, the one friendly face she'd encountered in two days, peeked around the solid wood. "The jarl has returned, my lady. He stands ready to receive you."

Ainslin's heart quaked, and her stomach hollowed.

The jarl's brother, Ruard, had stood proxy not hours earlier when the priest conducted the ceremony. She hadn't voiced all the questions buzzing like bees in her head, yet Ruard had quietly informed Ainslin that the jarl had encountered an unexpected delay.

She prayed her husband had Ruard's easy smile. Did the jarl look like his brother? Did he have eyes the color of the sea? Hair the color of ripe wheat?

Ruard's gentle treatment of her had given Ainslin hope. From birth, she'd heard the tales of the vicious berserkers who'd pillaged Northumbria and Mercia for centuries, and she'd expected harsh treatment from her Norse spouse and brethren.

Resting a hand on the lone table in the cottage, she levered to her feet, her knees suddenly too weak to support her frame.

Martha heaved off the bench, grabbed the cloak from the pallet near the blazing fire, and limped over to Ainslin.

She hated to make her old nurse rise and walk, but needed the few moments to compose her mind and prepare for meeting her spouse, the new stepfather of her sons.

Ainslin accepted the cloak and settled the warm furs around her shoulders. "I am ready, Thora." She straightened, murmured farewell to Martha and left the cozy hut.

Spring hadn't quite settled on the ground, and patches of snow carpeted the mountains behind the hut. Forests covered the steep slopes. The hazy

light made mischief with the shadows. What appeared to be small animals resting in the newly sprung meadow grasses turned out to be knolls when she walked closer.

A slight breeze nipped at her ungloved hands, and an icy gust slipped under the fur cloak, swirling the skirts of the emerald *crytel* she wore. Martha had insisted on the front-laced gown, and the scooped-neck chemise underneath the silk provided little protection against the cold.

She tugged the fur-lined cloak higher on her neck.

Taking a deep inhale, the pungent pine fragrance somehow soothing, she held the breath and then blew out slowly. A smile tugged at her lips when she saw the dancing exhale frosted by the chill. The twins considered blowing out frosty air as much fun as watching jesters tumble.

Thora walked three paces in front of Ainslin, weaving around the many huts of the settlement. 'Twould take time to accustom to this seaside fortress, so different from Castle Næss' keep. The vast stone longhouse, the stables, cattle pens and the dozens of cottages inside the walled settlement contrasted sharply with Hadrain's motte and bailey keep in Cumbria.

Ainslin glanced ahead and stubbed a toe on a rock. They walked to a dwelling built into the mountain's slope. A copse of trees blocked a portion of the abode.

Why so distant from the longhouse? So none may hear my screams? I must not falter. I must please him. I must persuade him to send for Brom and Rob.

"This way, my lady," Thora called, halting where the dense tree trunks divided and a narrow path appeared.

The warmth of the sun disappeared, and a sudden wind lifted her loose curls, sending chills around her neck. Night fell swift and absolute, full darkness descending in the time it took to stride a score footsteps. The moon ventured from the clouds shielding the stars, and a silvery stream of light illuminated the lodge nestled into the mountainside.

Thora halted in front of the log structure. Hewn from massive pine trunks, the abode proved larger than Ainslin expected. No caretaker's one-room dwelling this, but a residence fit for a jarl as powerful and wealthy as the Northern Bear.

"My lord," Thora said, knocking on the wood. "Your lady is here."

The door opened, and a monstrous form crowded the doorway. A fire crackled and sparked behind the jarl, the light throwing his features into

shadows. Ainslin licked her lips, caught the nervous movement, clamped her mouth shut and folded her hands at her waist.

“Twill be all, Thora.”

His voice, so deep as to mimic the growl of a bear, crawled into her belly. He had the size of a great black bear too. She had to squeeze her legs together to stay standing and not turn and sprint back to Martha and safety.

Thora dipped a curtsy and spun around, leaving Ainslin standing alone. She swallowed furiously when twigs snapped under the girl’s retreating footsteps.

“Come in, my lady.” He stepped to the side and waved a hand to the blazing fireplace. “The fire will warm your chilled flesh.”

She concentrated on placing one foot in front of the other, and stopped only when a stray spark from the fire singed the back of her hand. Slowly, Ainslin turned to face the man she would call husband from this day onward.

He wore leather boots the color of a fawn’s neck, buttery and brown, with flecks of white ash. She gauged his feet three times the size of hers. Dark, loose breeches, the blue of a deep fjord, disappeared into the finely wrought shoes. The braided hem of his tunic reminded her of the markets near King Cnut’s courts, where she’d first touched silk from the East.

An intricate semblance of a bear, embroidered in gold thread, preceded the matching braid of the tunic’s neck. He wore no belt, no cloak, and she hesitated for three of the beats leaping in the hollow of his throat before lifting her gaze from taut neck muscle to his face.

Norðanverðr Bjarndýr. Warrior. Husband.

“Be seated,” he commanded. Two chairs of a size to house his enormous frame, separated by a square table, stood to the right of the stone fireplace. Without further ado, he swiveled, and took a giant stride to the door.

Ainslin held her breath, skidded to the chair, and collapsed onto the wooden seat. Her feet didn’t reach the planked floor, the hard seat back soared above her head, and she peeped at him, hoping he wouldn’t notice the slight movement. Her heart drummed so loudly in her ears, she couldn’t think, and her fingers fumbled with the brooch pinned to her cloak.

Spying him stoking the fire, she stared at his back.

Hair lush and black with blue glints fell to shoulders of such width, her breathing stuttered. For a heartbeat, Ainslin’s eyes refused to focus and her insides warmed. The chill from the short walk evaporated, and her toes curled in the half boots she wore. A wave of heat rode her flesh, akin to a flame from the fire reaching under her crytel and licking her from ankles to

neck. The rustle of his garments and the sound of his boots squeaking on the wood as he stood, stilled her movements. Averting her eyes, Ainslin pretended to adjust the chain *gyrde* riding low on her waist, rubbing a thumb over the familiar carving in the gold.

His scent, leather, smoke, and a tang of pine, grew more intense as he strode to table. The aroma seemed to shroud her, until she could no longer discern if any hint of the lavender bath Martha had prepared lingered on her skin. The air in the room seemed to take on substance and weighted her shoulders. Ainslin stared at the knots in the pine table, aware he heard her quick inhales, and warmth blossomed in her cheeks.

I have seen eight and ten summers. I am no green maiden.

She prayed he didn't notice her flushed face, her trembling fingers, or the rapid fanning of her lashes.

"I like not this maiden's pretense of nerves." Using the toe of one boot, he moved the opposite chair back. "We are wed by the king's choice. The alliance is beneficial for both of us."

His arrogance made her teeth snap together. She welcomed the anger, but remained silent.

"What, no protest?"

"Pray continue," she said, her voice dulcet and soft. "I am anxious to know the advantages of becoming a married woman, with no control over my lands or my wealth. As a widow, I enjoyed control of both."

"Your sons need a guardian," he retorted, and reached to the bench along the wall for a clay pitcher and two glass goblets.

"My sons are in Cumbria," she stated. "With no protection save the king's decree."

He set a glass in front of her, poured wine into the green vessel, then filled his goblet, rested the jug on the table, and leaned back in the chair. His lips turned up at the corners, and the fine lines at the corners of his eyes deepened. For the first time, she met his stare full on, and her heart skipped a slew of thumps at the storm in his gray eyes.

* * *

"Nay, my lady," Torsten drawled, stretched his feet below the table, his boots sounding a soft thud in the momentary silence. "Your sons journey to Bear Hall, as we speak."

She gasped and opened her mouth, but didn't voice a word; instead, a rosy hue tinted her flesh, and her gaze dropped from his.

He hooded his eyes, surveying the rising and falling of breasts he dreamed of suckling. Saliva coated his mouth. The famed porcelain skin of her forehead, praised and lauded by the courts' skalds, furrowed, and her tongue flicked at one corner of her mouth.

Torsten yearned to roar his victory to all and sundry. He, the Northern Bear, had wrenched a reaction from Ainslin, the beauty whose frigid temperament 'twas said would freeze the fire-spewing mountains of *Ísland*.

"No thanks, my lady?"

"The king gave his permission?" She studied her lap.

"I need not his blessing," Torsten replied. "He gave you and yours over to me."

She looked up then, her green eyes flecked gold like a cat's, the brown lashes spiky with moisture, and he clenched his jaw, unwilling to surrender to the lure of her love for the twin sons she had borne another man.

"When?" she asked, setting her fingers on the table's edge.

"A sennight after you began your journey here, I sent my brother to fetch your sons to you." Torsten sipped his wine and watched her carefully, for Ainslin the Frigid had that iron control back in place.

"Why?" She lifted her chin, and the pride the women of the court so envied shone bright from eyes no longer threatened by the womanly weakness of tears.

"I would have something from you." Torsten cursed the coarseness in his voice brought on by a cock that had been stiff and hard and aching for her tight sheath for too long.

She never flinched. "Pray continue, my lord."

"I would have you warm and willing in my bed." He forced a harsh edge into his tone, though he spoke softly.

Torsten shoved his chair back when she lurched to her feet and all the color drained from her cheeks. Her gaze flitted about, landing on the fireplace, the pile of logs, the pitcher, and all the while, her chest heaved. Suddenly she stumbled around the table, hugged her arms, and gave him her back.

The gods had created woman simply to confound man. Torsten ground his teeth, stifling the automatic lifting of his arms, and resisting the instinct to hold and comfort the woman he had schemed to make his for nigh on two seasons.

Her deep inhale filled the sudden quiet in the lodge.

Ainslin shifted to face him.

The dark circles within her green eyes had shrunk to the width of a needle.

Such terror? Why? Had her husband used her cruelly? Beat her?

“You have my oath, I will always come to you of my own accord whenever you so desire.”

Each word swelled his prick to greater girth and length, and his weeping slit dampened his loose breeches. By Odin, he would not spill his seed like an untried youth. Visions of her naked, the long, golden hair spread on the fine sheets he’d purchased on his last voyage, her nipples begging for his attentions, hazed his brain.

“I would have your oath, my lord, that you will not cast aside me or my sons, should you find I do not please you,” she said, hands twined together so tightly the skin on her fingers lost all color.

His cock jerked, his sacs tightened, his lust so great ’twas all he could do not to lay her on the table and pound into her puss.

“Tis done,” he growled, knowing the twain could never happen. She pleased him, by the gods. She pleased him by simply breathing. “I would have you now, Ainslin.”

Chapter Two

Ainslin had no notion of what would happen next, but never expected Torsten to pounce, curl one massive arm beneath her knees, and lift her high against his chest. The quick action giddied her mind, and she couldn't draw in enough air to soothe the ache in her chest.

The jarl marched out of the chamber and into another, and yet another. Ainslin glimpsed an enormous bed tucked against a wall, a slate fireplace, this one stacked with unlit logs, a bench and table, and two sturdy chairs, before Torsten spun around in a circle and everything blurred. Two more paces, and he halted and lowered her onto the mattress. Fine linen caressed her hands, when she tried to dry the dampness coating her palms on the fabric.

He sat, his eyes fixed on her face, unfastened the loops on his boots and tugged them off, stacking both side by side at the foot of the bed. In one fluid motion, he pulled the tunic over his head, and draped the length of cloth over a chair.

A shudder racked Ainslin from head to toe at the sight of his colossal chest.

"You are cold," he muttered and lurched to his feet, striding over to the fireplace.

Ainslin realized he'd seen her trembling and believed her chilled. Though the chamber had no source of warmth save the stone lamps hanging from the rafters, her body flamed from the inside outward, her skin sparking and tingling. Fascinated by the way his back muscles bunched and flexed, by a scar that ran from one shoulder to mid-arm, by the contrast of his inky hair and bronzed skin, she struggled to her elbows, staring at him, her eyes greedy to absorb every detail, every nuance.

The fire caught in a blaze of leaping blue and yellow flames, the wood snapping and crackling under the heated assault. He glanced over his shoulder, and their gazes locked.

She stopped breathing, her belly coiled, and a tightness squeezed her womanly parts.

He set the iron rod he'd used to stoke the logs against the stone frame, stood, and in two great strides reached the bed. The expression on his face made her mouth go dry and her nostrils flare, and a tremor of fear caused her stomach to clench. He loomed above her like a giant, and she bit her lip so hard she tasted blood.

“Nay,” he said, and sat on the mattress; the straw dipped under his weight. His thumb stroked her wounded lip, and he bent his head and lapped the drop clinging there.

Embers burned the spot his tongue stroked, his hot breath tickled her nose, and the faint aroma of the wine he’d drunk intoxicated her mind. Her eyelids grew heavy, and, when he fitted his lips to hers, closed. Ainslin gave over to him, letting him do as he willed, not able to think, only able to feel. His lips were soft and full, he licked the seam of her mouth, and the caress struck like a bolt of lightning, setting her flesh ablaze. Her sex grew damp, and a trickle of moistness made her squeeze her thighs together.

His palm cupped her face, and he lay alongside her on the bed. His mouth opened to suckle her lower lip, and she yearned to touch him, to feel his hard chest beneath her fingertips. Uncertain what he expected, she fisted her hands.

When he nipped the place he’d suckled, she gasped, and his tongue slid between her lips. Wonder of wonders, that a tongue could give such pleasure. Ainslin fell back on the mattress, and his leg glided over her body trapping her hips against the linen-covered bed. He licked her teeth, tickled the corner of her lip, touched the tip of her tongue with his, drawing it into his mouth, sucking lightly.

His mouth left hers, and her eyelids flew up. Her breathing ragged, she gazed at the arrogant line of his jaw, the thick fringe of onyx lashes hiding his eyes from hers and casting shadows on his prominent cheekbones. He trailed kisses over her face, openmouthed kisses that had her toes curling. He traced the whorls of her ear, and her womanhood clenched.

Never had Ainslin imagined such a delicious caress. She grabbed the sheets when he bit the plump flesh of her lobe. The sharp nip made her belly muscles ripple. Her breasts throbbed, her sheath contracted, the nub there burned. The chamber became an inferno of warmth, and a thin patina of perspiration coated her arms and hands.

A whimper escaped her lips when his mouth returned to hers.

“Open,” he ordered, he licked the seam of her lips, and when she obeyed, his mouth plundered hers. His tongue swirled in and tangled hers into a plunge and retreat rhythm, coaxing her into a dance that grew more furious with each probing advance. Of their own volition, her hands reached behind his neck, her fingers tangled in his silky hair, massaging his head, rubbing the smooth skin of his nape.

Ainslin surrendered, following his lead, molding her lips to his. His touch, his smell, the mating of their mouths too dizzying for any notion to stay in her head. When he lifted away from her, it took long seconds before she could find the strength to open her eyes. She wanted to protest the loss of his magical lips, but words wouldn't form, and her head fell back on the pillow. A veil of hair hid his face from her, and she felt his fingers on the neckline of her dress.

He muttered a curse, reached over the bed to a table, snatched a small dagger, cut the laces of her tunic, and threw the knife back to its original position. Turning back to her, he groaned, "Mine."

Her nipples puckered under his fierce stare, the transparent chemise no match for the greed in his eyes. He tore the front of the garment to her waist. One hand curled around her breast, and his calloused thumbs grazed the aching tip. Ainslin's head rolled back and forth; she dug her nails into her palms, yearning for more, for a release from the painful throbbing between her thighs, from the convulsive contracting of her sex.

When his mouth clamped onto her breast, and his tongue laved the bud, she cried out and knitted her fingers in his hair. He bit down on the turgid peak. Her hips came off the mattress, and she held him fast to her breast, resisting when he raised his head. "Nay. Nay."

He chuckled and licked his way to the other breast. "Aye, Ainslin, aye." Her legs fell apart when his tongue outlined the pink flesh around her pulsating nipple, drawing smaller and smaller circles, but not touching the throbbing peak. He fisted his hands in her tunic and moved over her, bunching her skirts at the waist. Cool air washed her knees, thighs, and mound.

She blinked and looked down just as he sucked the crested tip of her breast into his mouth. She moaned when he drew hard on her flesh and then tickled the bud. His teeth sawed her nipple; she groaned in frustration, her foot rubbing up and down the linen sheets.

Torsten nipped harder; she arched, reaching for something just out of her grasp, pain-pleasure lancing her sex, the sensation unbearable, and she yelped when his finger plunged into her sheath. His thumb caressed the fleshy nubbin, and her legs clamped around his hand.

The heel of his palm abraded the burning nub, and she ground on his palm, her bottom lifting off the mattress. When he removed his hand, Ainslin wanted to rake her nails across his shoulders and order him back. She felt

bereft, and only by tangling her hands in the sheets did she halt the impulse to throw her arms around his neck and beg him to stay.

In the space of a heartbeat, he loosened the rope tying his trousers and shucked them off. Fear seeped through the desire hazing her mind at the sight of his erect cock, the head slick and weeping from a slit in the middle. Ainslin swallowed as she took in the size of his enormous organ; her mouth went dry, and her bottom cheeks dipped with the mattress when he rolled over her body. The heaviness of his torso, the rigidness of his cock on her mound, made her breathing hitch and her sex cream.

* * *

Torsten kissed her hard, his mouth eating at her lips. Ainslin's passionate response fired a bolt of lust more powerful than the lightning from Thōrr's mighty hammer, Mjöllnir. His sacs contracted, and the berserker in him went wild. He cupped her ass, tilting her hips forward, and he drove into her, impaling her in one thrust, tearing through her maidenhead.

Shock froze his limbs. He looked down to find her eyes squeezed shut, her forehead creased, and her mouth pinched.

A maiden?

His prick throbbed; his sac, swollen full to bursting, demanded release. Lust drummed his skull, raging desire strummed his veins, the urge to plunder and pillage racked a shudder through his knotted muscles. He held still, not daring even a hint of friction, too close to the edge to rush the ecstasy of her clamping sheath, the fiery grip of her channel.

Anger cut a slice off his hunger, and he raised his head and stared at the roof, battling the craving to spill his seed, to claim her, to own her, to pound into her tight puss, to find a senseless release.

She set her hands on his chest, her fingers unsteady, and he felt the hammering of her heart as her wrists connected with his chest.

Torsten glanced at her and ground his teeth when he found her eyes open wider than a startled doe's, the gold in the green reflecting the light from the lamp above the bed.

"I do not please you," she whispered, ducking her chin.

"Nay." Trying not to move his lower body, he kissed her closed eyelids, her forehead, the corner of one eye. "Ainslin, we will speak of this later. 'Tis

naught but pleasing to be sheathed in your womanhood. I fear the pain of your broken maidenhead scattered all pleasure for you.”

She lifted her head abruptly, and her skull impacted his jaw, the crack like thunder in the silence of the chamber. “Your pardon, my lord. I did not mean to wound you.”

A smile played at his mouth. “I make you a bargain, Ainslin. After this, you will kiss my jaw better, and I will kiss your sheath better.”

Twin circles of pink blossomed in her cheeks, and her eyes grew big and round as the meaning of his words sank in. He studied her face for any sign of pain and found none, her mouth now relaxed, not pursed, and he knew she was not aware of her fingers tracing the brown flesh around his nipples.

Torsten rocked into her gently; her eyebrows rose. He repeated the motion and, by Odin, her sweet puss clutched his cock greedily. Sweat beaded his forehead. He worked his jaw and withdrew slowly, easing his throbbing shaft from her channel until the crown rimmed her entrance.

Her nails dug into his shoulders, her eyes glazed over and she mewled.

The agony of filling her slowly again, sliding his prick into her convulsing womanhood, almost did him in. Torsten gritted his teeth, fighting the urge to pummel and pound.

She slipped a hand down to his ass and kneaded the cheek, her lithe fingers stabbing lust-bolts through his groin.

He grunted and concentrated on another slow retreat.

Her nails bit into his rump, and she squeezed his bottom rhythmically.

Torsten’s control slipped, and he thrust to the hilt.

She lifted her leg and wrapped her calf around his hip.

Hanging onto the last of his warrior discipline, he rasped, “Ainslin, do you hurt?”

“Tis agony,” she moaned. “Can you not move faster?”

Freed by the sweetest words he’d ever heard, Torsten plunged into her; her walls stretched and clamped, sucking at his retreating shaft. Gripping her hips tightly, he raised her bottom and drove into her again and again, angling to hit that spot he learned of with harem women.

Distracted when her breast grazed his cheek, he fastened his mouth on the pouting bud, suckling hard. Ainslin’s body bowed, her back arching, and he shuddered through her peak, his teeth grazing her nipple, his cock plundering her puss. His sac drew taut, his prick erupted, spilling his seed and filling her womb.

The release left him spent, his mind blank, his muscles slack. Torsten rested his forehead on hers. Her glorious hair smelled of lavender. He threaded a sunset curl around a finger and rested his weight on one elbow to better observe her features.

Eyes closed, lips reddened, mouth curving at the corners, she heaved a long sigh, and her lids lifted.

When their gazes locked, color washed over her skin, and she quickly turned her head to the side. The rosy hue staining her cheeks ebbed and flowed. He suddenly wanted to prolong their intimacy and decided to forgo questioning his new wife for the time being.

Tremors continued to strum her channel, and her breathing stuttered with each contraction. His cock refused to subside, and though he loathed leaving the heat of her puss, Torsten knew he must, for he had used her hard. “I am parched.”

Her eyelids flickered; her head turned on the pillow.

“And hungry.” She wouldn’t look at him, her glance darting to his chest, throat, anywhere but his eyes. “Helga had the cook prepare a cold meal for us. There is a tray in the main chamber.”

“Shall I fetch the food to you?”

It bothered Torsten that she no longer touched him, while some compulsion drove him to stroke her skin, sniff her hair, and toy with the bud of her breast. “Nay. I will take us to the food.” With that, he eased out of her and rolled over to stand on the floor.

She clutched the torn garment together, and he decided he preferred the dress Saxon women wore—the front lacings a definite advantage for a lust-dazed mind like his. He glanced at her legs, spied the blood smeared on her thighs, and stifled a curse. All the questions he needed answered swarmed in his brain.

Chapter Three

Ainslin cringed under Torsten's piercing stare. She glanced in the direction he gazed and winced when she saw the streaks of blood on her thighs.

He pressed her shoulder. "Lie down. I must attend to you first."

"Nay," she blurted, heat flashing from her scalp to her toes.

"Aye Ainslin," he declared. "I inflicted the injury, and I will tend to you."

Her breathing faltered, watching him stride to the pitcher and basin on the bench against the wall. She had seen warriors train, had cared for her ailing husband during the long spring before his death, knew men and women rutted, but never had she anticipated the beauty of this Viking jarl. His back she'd memorized earlier. Now she drank in his sinewy calves, her eyes lingering on his powerful thighs bunching as he walked. She wet her lips when she glimpsed red marks from her nails on his flesh.

A chill draft snaked over her chest. She fumbled to relace her gown and managed to find three lengths to tie together. Though the silk gaped, her breasts were covered, and she looked up to find him crouching by the fire. His sacs hung loose below his buttocks.

When Torsten stood and turned, she gasped and understood the cause of the sharp pinch and the initial discomfort when he filled her sheath. His prick jutted proud and erect from a nest of dark curls, the crown slick and reddened, a tiny slit glinting like an eye in the middle. Fascinated by his organ, following the bobbing sway of it as he marched, Ainslin obeyed his command to spread her legs without hesitation. When he sat on the mattress she noticed her blood on him and spoke her thoughts aloud. "And who attends to you?"

He laughed and the booming chortle rent the quiet of the chamber. Tipping her chin with a finger, he forced her gaze away from his sex. "Twould be my pleasure should you desire to do so wife."

Ainslin knew she blushed all over, and her eyes widened when he pressed a damp cloth to her mound. "Tis warm."

"Nay. 'Tis a flame that burns me alive."

She frowned and his lips twitched. "'Tis a bawdy jest, Ainslin."

The drying cloth was warm too, and she sighed at the pleasure of having someone care for her for a change. Her muscles relaxed and she sank into the straw mattress. A bawdy jest; she studied his face. Did the creases at the corners of his eyes mean he laughed often? In her experience, ready smiles

were in short supply with warriors. He'd been patient with her, hadn't struck her when he discovered her a maiden and now he cleansed her flesh. Hope surged and her heart sprinted.

He sent for my sons, and 'tis wondrous easy to be warm and willing in his bed. I must find other ways to please him. 'Twere not for Helga, I could be content here.

When he pulled her skirts down and rose, Ainslin lurched after him.

"Nay," he said turning around. "Ainslin, the pain—"

"Twas a pinch. I am sore not in pain." Ainslin took the cloths from his hands. "Tis your turn to lie down, my lord."

He cupped her cheek and gazed into her eyes. "Are you cert?"

"Aye," she answered, not able to prevent a smile. "I am cert, my lord."

"Torsten. My name is Torsten."

"I am cert, Torsten."

As she washed the stained cloth and wrung it out, Ainslin traced Torsten's movements, her lips curling when he thumped onto the mattress and a flurry of dust motes jumped and leapt, catching the lamp's light. Head resting on his palms, he stretched his long legs, and grinned when he caught her staring. She went to the fire, stooped, and warmed the cloths, keeping the dry rectangles away from the sparks.

Excitement tempered by a hint of fear had her fingers shaking, and she near dropped the damp material in the flames. *When will he ask me? Should I tell all? Will he cast me aside?*

Swallowing, she rose and moved to the bed, her half boots' soft clicks muted by the skins on the wood floor. Her courage faltered when she sat on the mattress, and she kept her eyes fixed on his bulging arms.

"To me, Ainslin, look to me." His voice dripped honey.

He circled her wrist and guided her hand to his sex curling her fingers around his rigid arousal. Ainslin peeked at their joined hands. His cock twitched in her grasp. Slowly, gently, she dabbed at the bloody streak. His sex jerked once, twice, and she exclaimed, "It has a mind of its own."

"Oftentimes," he agreed taking the drying cloth from her grasp. "Enough, wife. I can bear your cleansing no more. You are tender and my belly rumbles. To the food."

He pulled on his breeches, not bothering to don his boots or his tunic, and after she finished tidying her rumpled crytel, he insisted on carrying her to the main chamber. Ainslin discovered she liked being in his embrace. Her nose bumped his chest, and the hairs there tickled the tip. He smelled of

smoke from the fire, and she couldn't resist inhaling deeply, her lids lowering as she savored the strength of his hold, the safety of his arms, and the heat he radiated.

Torsten set her down in the chair she'd occupied before. The fire in the chamber had died down, and the logs glowed ruby hues. She shivered and hugged her elbows.

"You are chilled again," Torsten stated as he strode to the fire. "The weather is milder in Cumbria than here at Stjórardalr."

"I will grow accustomed." She straightened in the high backed chair. "I will not complain."

Ainslin couldn't fathom how he didn't feel the chill in the room, naked as he was save for the loose woolen breeches. She watched him throw logs into the fireplace and stoke the ashes until flames leapt and danced. The sweet smell of pine freshened the warming air.

She scanned the bench that had held the jug of wine and spied a tray at the far end. At once, she hopped off the bench and took two paces to the right. 'Tis the food you spoke of, my lord?" Ainslin asked, lifting the tray.

"Aye," he replied, placed the stoking iron on the fireplace's stone mantel and reached her in two strides. Taking the tray from her, Torsten set it on one end of the table. He scooped her off her feet, sat on the chair, and arranged her sideways on his lap. "You like fowl, Ainslin?"

"Aye," she replied, trying to not wriggle or squirm, for she had never sat on a man's lap before and was only too aware of his tumescent cock prodding her bottom. He touched the wine goblet to her lips.

"Drink," he directed.

Obedying him, Ainslin sipped the sweet wine. Her heart pounded like the bodham drums of war.

Frazzled under his sharp scrutiny, a few drops of the liquid spilled onto her chin.

He pounced, his tongue lapping the wine from her skin, and the tingling caress sent sparks straight to her toes.

Torsten brushed a morsel of fowl across her lips. "Open."

Ainslin glanced longingly at the chair opposite, but parted her lips and captured the food with her mouth.

"You wed the Earl of Northman four winters ago." He speared a fat carrot and sliced the orange root in half. "How come you to me a maiden?"

Startled, she jerked back; heat licked her throat and face, and her mind spun. The truth spilled from her lips. "Hadrain could not...he had seen two score summers, and his manhood no longer rose."

"The marriage was never consummated," Torsten said, his eyes narrowing. "Why did you marry then?"

Ainslin focused on her twined fingers. "Hadrain and my father were fostered together and were great friends. My father was killed when King Malcolm reclaimed Northumbria. Hadrain discovered that the Earl of Northman intended to petition the king for my hand in marriage. We married before the messenger left for the king's court."

Torsten frowned, his black brows pinched together. "I know of Earl Sigrid of Northman. His lands adjoin yours and Hadrain's."

She nodded. "Hadrain had no liking for Sigrid, but could not deny him a room or meal when he visited Cumbria." Ainslin studied her short nails. "Sigrid is a lustful man. He took my maid, Greta, to his bed. She did not go willingly."

Tipping her chin up he forced her to meet his gaze, "The boys are hers?"

"Aye," Ainslin whispered. "She died birthing them."

"Why did Hadrain claim the boys his?"

"Hadrain's sons from his second marriage died in the battle with my father, leaving him with no living heirs. He feared Sigrid would win control of his holdings and me after he passed. Greta got with child from Sigrid, and Hadrain saw a way to keep me safe." Tears pricked her eyes as she remembered Greta's struggle to birth the boys and Hadrain's long illness. "He announced I was increasing and needed special care. He sent Greta and I and a few trusted servants to his holding in Wales."

"Who knows this secret?" The grim cast of Torsten's mouth had her heart stuttering like a court jester entertaining a crowd.

"Only two who know still live. The steward who accompanied us to Wales, Robyn Lancaster, and his wife, Eileen. They are loyal to me." Her voice failed.

* * *

Torsten studied the woman he'd lusted after for two seasons. A jarl had to be able to determine truth from falsehood, and he had led his people too many years not to notice her trembling hands or the pulse leaping in her throat. Ainslin told him only part of her tale.

Ainslin didn't know that Sigrid had been his rival for her hand. Torsten had spent a full season at King Cnut's court to sway the king's decision to him. If Sigrid sniffed the truth, he would claim not only his sons, but also Ainslin as the mother of his children. Even tonight's bloodied sheets wouldn't convince others he had pierced her maidenhood, for Ainslin had claimed the boys hers for nigh on three winters.

"I will send for this steward and his wife," Torsten stated. "My steward is elderly and I need seek his replacement soon."

He smoothed the lines creasing her forehead. "Worry not, Ainslin, all will be well." In truth, though her lies provided flint to a fire waiting to explode, this secret would bind her to him. "Sigrid and I are not allies, and he has no reason to stray this far north." Spearing a chunk of partridge, he added, "And should our union prove fruitful, you will not need to accompany me to Cnut's court."

Fear chased her eyes, the dark centers expanded and the green outer circles deepened, reminding him of a meadow in full season. "What concerns you?"

"Will you send my sons back?" Ainslin's voice wavered and she looked away.

"Nay." He brushed the morsel of food over her lips. His cockstand thickened when she lapped a bead of juice that threatened to fall. "We will raise them with our sons."

Casting him a sidelong glance, she finished chewing, and swallowed. "I thank you, my lord."

"Torsten, Ainslin," he said, the correction reflexive, more focused on her pallor at the mention of their progeny. Cutting a thick slice of cheese, he pondered her reactions before breaking the wedge in two and feeding her the smaller bit.

Her eyelids slid to half-mast as she chewed. "'Tis delicious," she uttered after swallowing. "I have not tasted such cheese before."

"'Tis from Verona. I purchased it in the markets there," Torsten explained, unable to take his eyes from her glistening ruby mouth as she licked her lips. His sacs grew taut, and his belly hunger vanished as a notion prowled the corners of his mind. "Do you swim?"

She blinked. "As well as a trout," she replied, her eyes twinkling, her lips curving. "My sons too. 'Tis my secret pastime when the sun is hot."

Torsten grinned, shoved the chair back, and stood, cradling her in his arms. "My brothers will arrive soon, and we will celebrate our union with a feast." He marched through three chambers.

"There is more than Ruard and the one who fetches the boys?"

"Ay four in total—Ruard, Magnus, Njal, and Jarvik who brings the boys." He freed one hand to unbar the rear door to his lodge and shove it open.

"Is Helga your sole sister?"

Hearing the anxiety in her tone, he glanced at her, strode outside and pulled the door shut.

"She is my stepsister. Thank Odin I have only the one. Helga departs to wed her betrothed soon." Making a mental note to learn of Helga's treatment of Ainslin, he made his way to the private bathhouse nestled into the mountainside. Her breath warmed his chest as she sighed, and her stiff limbs relaxed in his arms.

Smiling when she gasped as they entered the wooden hut, Torsten lit two hanging stone lamps to allow her to see the hot spring, the wood stacked near the stone pit's side, and the iron tray filled with smooth rocks. Rising steam warmed his back, and he slid her down his body. Torsten knelt, unlaced her half boots, and removed her ivory hose and green garters, savoring the silkiness of her firm calves and running his fingertips along the back of her knees.

She gasped, and her hands resting on his shoulders gripped tighter when he repeated the caress. He repressed a grin as he stood, brought her fingers to his lips, kissed each one in turn before asking, "Tis to your liking?"

"Tis wondrous," she murmured, wriggling her toes. "The floor holds not the winter's chill." "Nor does the spring. 'Tis shallow at the edges, but deeper in the middle." Unfastening the laces of her gown as he spoke, Torsten sighed when her breasts sprang free, the pouting nipples pleading for his mouth. "Mine." Cupping her breasts, he weighed them before tasting one, then the other. "For two seasons I have dreamed of these."

"My lord?"

He cursed his loose tongue. "I chanced upon you when I visited the Cnut's court to negotiate a ransom." Helping her to step out of the garments, he continued. "'Twas then I learned you were widowed, and I petitioned for your hand."

Her eyes grew as wide as a fawn's. She shook her head. "We did not meet; I would never forget you."

“You were attending the king’s wife, Ælfgifu. But ’tis good you find me unforgettable.”

Pink washed over her throat and cheeks when he shed his breeches and his cock pranced and preened.

“Tis time to make good on our bargain, Ainslin. I will kiss your injury better and you will kiss mine. I fear ’twill take many kisses before either one of us is healed.” He tilted her chin, set his mouth over hers, and drank deeply.

Chapter Four

Ainslin reeled under the onslaught of Torsten's lips, too giddied by his tongue's slow exploration of her mouth to gnaw at the worry plaguing her mind. She tiptoed to absorb more of him, her breasts grazing the dusting of hair on his chest. She clenched his arms when he licked the ridge of her teeth. She helped when he tugged her gown off, and the material pooled on the packed dirt.

His skin exuded heat, and she whimpered when his palms cupped her bottom, and he rubbed against her, his weeping cock dampening her belly. Warm curls of steam wrapped around her legs, his tongue stoked a fire deep inside and she clung to him, linking her arms around his neck.

"Ainslin," he growled, and placed hot, wet kisses along her neck.

"Torsten," she moaned as a whirlwind of sensation traveled up her spine and her womanhood grew slick.

His hand slipped between her thighs, one finger sliding up and down her folds.

Her inner walls clenched when his finger probed her entrance.

The world tipped as he swept her off her feet, and in one stride they were in the water. Soothing waves created by his weight lapped at her bottom, tickled her breast. He made for a large boulder that breached the spring's surface, and set her atop its flat surface, arranging her so her legs dangled over the rock's sides.

"'Tis the place I injured?" he queried, sipping at her folds, "Nay—mayhap here?" He kissed her thigh.

Ainslin rested on her elbows, shock draining the blood to her sex at the sight of his dark hair teasing her thighs, his lips suckling her swollen flesh. He looked up at her and smiled when he saw her slack-jawed reaction.

"Nay, 'tis not right." When he spoke, the sound rumbled to her channel, his hot breath sailed over her drenched folds, and her eyes closed when his mouth firmed around the bud at the apex of her woman's flesh.

His tongue swirled over and over the bud, Ainslin lifted her hips, the walls of her sheath contracted, the ache inside unbearable. Her legs crossed on his back, and when he nipped the bud hard, she crested, her hips wrenching off the rock, and she tangled her fingers in his hair, holding his head fast to her.

Torsten moved to lay his cheek on her stomach and his arms tightened around her. His hands glided over her back, the caress calming. Gradually,

her panting slowed. She lifted eyelids more weighty than the boulder on which she rested, and her clasp on his shoulder loosened. He lifted her off the rock, strode to shallower waters and sat with her on his lap.

“Your honey is sweeter than the finest nectar,” he said and brushed his lips over hers, sliding his tongue over the seam of her mouth, dipping inside to touch the tips together. Ainslin couldn’t absorb it all, too dizzy from her explosive peak to think.

Breaking the gentle kiss, he met her gaze, a golden twinkle from the hanging lamp glinting in his gray eyes. “I fear I did not find the injury to soothe, Ainslin, so I must needs try again.”

She squeaked.

Dawn neared when Torsten carried her back to the bed in the lodge. Her scattered thoughts gathered as memories alighted from their time in the bathhouse. Never would she have imagined the things they did. The cock that had frightened her mere hours before had now become an obsession.

He settled alongside her on the mattress, shifting her to lie on his chest, and his fingers toyed with her hair. “Ask your questions, Ainslin. We are man and wife now, and I will have no secrets between us, and no unanswered queries. ’Tis plain you did not know the intricacies of bedsport.”

Ainslin’s eyes narrowed and she raised her head. “You read minds as well?”

“As well as what?” His broad grin did not amuse her. “Ah, I see from the rosy hue of your cheeks what you think. You needs know more about me kissing your puss better. ’Tis a pleasure practiced by many.”

Her face grew warmer. “I had no mother or sister to...” She swallowed, lifted her chin, and continued. “To tell me of bedsport.”

“*Elska*, your face tells every thought.” He reached between her legs and cupped her mound. “’Tis termed a puss oftentimes, when warriors converse.” Capturing her hand, he curled her fingers around his cock. “’Tis a pecker, a willie, a shaft, a prick, a cock.”

“I know that one,” she protested. His pecker thickened. “And does it never get tired?”

“Nay.” His grin widened. “But you do.” He touched the tip of her nose. “Thus now we sleep.”

Ainslin woke to find Torsten gone and to discover her belongings had been transferred to the lodge while she slept. A peek out the window showed the sun high in the sky, so she donned a cream, high-necked chemise, a forest

green front-laced crytel with cream ribbons, matching hose and garters, her half boots, and then made her way to the longhouse.

Servants bustled in the main hall, carrying trays, buckets, balls of wool weaving, in different directions. A fire burned at either end of the room and the smell of roasting meat perfumed the air. Fresh, balmy breezes chased the fires' smoke through three open doorways.

Following the aroma, Ainslin threaded through the chamber. A slew of men bearing benches tromped into the hall. Behind them came a dozen warriors lugging tables.

Ainslin spied Thora and signaled her over. "Have the jarl's brothers arrived?"

"One has, my lady," the pink-cheeked girl replied. "Your sons also. Other visitors as well. We will have many guests tonight."

Thank you, Lord, for delivering my sons safely to me.

"Where is the jarl?"

"In the stables."

Before she could ask for directions, Ainslin spotted Torsten in the doorway surveying the activity. She reversed her steps, keeping Torsten in focus. When she neared him, a knight with a polished helm in his hand appeared at his side. The man had a familiar face, but still wore his hauberk, and she couldn't place him.

"Ainslin," Torsten's voice carried over the din in the hall. "Sigrid, Earl of Northman, accompanied your sons' journey to Bjarndýr Skáli."

Bile rushed up her throat, her stomach roiled. Ainslin's nails bit into her palms as she fought to contain her panicked fear. Yearning to sprint to her sons, she deliberately slowed her steps and took three deep inhales.

"My lords," Ainslin said, dipping a curtsy first to Torsten and then to Sigrid. "Welcome Earl Northman."

The words tasted bitter.

"Ainslin," Sigrid intoned.

"Pray, my lord. Where are my sons?" Ainslin directed the question to Torsten.

"Your steward and his wife have taken them to the kitchens," he replied, holding her gaze, a wealth of unsaid warning in his eyes. "Helga is making the household arrangements for Earl Northman."

Ainslin near fainted with relief.

"King Cnut's representative travels with the Earl and brings a missive for me."

Why has the king sent a man? What does Sigrid know? She fought to keep her turmoil from her face.

"Come, wife." Torsten extended an arm. "Make me acquainted with my new sons."

His sons? He won her heart with the claim. Tears of joy pricked at Ainslin's eyes. She met his gaze and smiled, laying her hand on his. As they walked through the hall, Torsten murmured, "All will be well, Ainslin."

"Why is he here now? Greta has been dead three winters," Ainslin whispered.

"Fear not, Ainslin. You and the boys are mine now. I will see no harm befalls any of you." Torsten placed his other hand on hers and turned to face her once they reached the kitchens.

"Mama!"

At the sound of Rob's high-pitched wail, Ainslin spun around, and stooped as the toddler ran into her open arms. "Rob. I am so happy you're here." She stroked his back and sniffed his hair. "Where's Brom?"

"Here, Mama."

Ainslin looked up to find Brom seated next to Eileen at a table near the doorway, waving a slice of bread in the air. She lifted Rob, who straddled his long legs over her hipbone, and stood.

"I rode a horse, Mama. I saw the sea. And I sailed a ship."

"Did not," called Brom as he toddled in her direction, chewing on the crusty end of a loaf. When he reached her, Brom craned his neck to stare at Torsten. "Are you our new papa?"

"I am," Torsten answered.

"Brom, Rob, meet your new papa, Jarl Torsten," Ainslin said.

"What is a jarl?" Rob piped and jumped to the floor.

Ainslin didn't anticipate Torsten's reaction. He chuckled, scooped a boy in either arm, and said, "A jarl is a leader of men."

Rob touched Torsten's clean-shaven face. "You lead men in battle?"

"Are you a warrior?" Brom asked before he crammed the remaining morsel of bread into his mouth

"I am," Torsten replied. He glanced over his shoulder, and flashed her a grin. "Time to take our sons to their new home, wife."

Her eyes filled with unshed tears and she wanted to swear fealty to him, to let him know he had her undying loyalty from this day on.

Both Brom and Rob began peppering Torsten with questions, their voices growing louder as each brother attempted to garner the Jarl's sole attention.

Torsten wore a bemused expression Ainslin knew well. Her sons were not of the strong, silent warrior bent and she frequently wished for blessed silence.

“Nay,” Torsten near bellowed. “One question at a time. Who is the elder?”

Rob pouted and then wailed, “Mama, ’tis not fair. Why did you not have me first? Why is Brom always first?”

“A warrior does not bewail the order of things,” Torsten declared. “Nor does he seek his mother’s assistance. Do you not aspire to your own sword Rob?”

Eileen’s gaze met Ainslin’s. “Your Jarl will soon have the boys sorted.”

Ainslin, Eileen and Robyn followed Torsten and the boys out of the kitchens, Ainslin marveling at the boys’ sudden silence. Torsten’s long stride took him out of hearing distance in mere minutes.

“Eileen, how comes Earl Northman to the Norse lands?” Ainslin whispered, linking arms with the steward’s wife.

Robyn, walking alongside Ainslin, answered, “Tis we who are with him, my lady. The earl journeys in support of King Cnut who would be King of England, Denmark, and Norway. Jarl Torsten’s brother arranged our passage on his ship.”

“I insisted on accompanying the boys.” Eileen set her mouth to Ainslin’s ear. “Earl Sigrid does not suspect.”

“Cert?” Ainslin met the other woman’s gaze.

“Both Robyn and I are cert, my lady. Do not worry.”

“Eileen, what does *elska* mean?” Ainslin regretted the blurted query immediately.

“Tis Norse for dearling or sweetling, my lady.”

A blush warmed Ainslin from head to toe.

They arrived at the lodge. Torsten deposited the boys on the top step and faced Ainslin. “Worry not, wife. Sigrid’s destination is Trondhjem, not Bjarndýr Skáli.”

Ainslin let out the breath she didn’t know she held. “Many thanks, my lord.”

His hand cupped her neck, his thumb stroked her jaw, and the storm in his eyes told Ainslin of his desire. “I must meet with the king’s messenger, *elska*. Stay here with our sons. Let the steward and his wife go to the kitchens and arrange a tray for you and our sons.”

Our sons. Three times again he had claimed the twins. ’Twas all Ainslin could do not to fling her arms around him and kiss every inch of his flesh. This night she would show Torsten her gratitude.

* * *

Torsten took the missive delivered by the king's representative to the hut he used for planning battles. His brothers, Ruard and Jarvik, joined him before he finished reading the king's instructions.

"What does Cnut the Great say?" Jarvik asked, his head braced on the far wall while he tipped the bench he sat on.

"We are ordered to Trondhjem for his coronation. The king offers my wife and me the honor of a marriage mass after the coronation." Torsten shrugged. "I have no interest in this Christian god, but my wife prays to him fervently."

"Tis hopeful she is fervent in all things, brother." Jarvik wagged his eyebrows.

Torsten glared at his sibling. "Word has it that King Olaf has fled to his ally, King Anund of Sweden."

"Twas a bloodless coup," Ruard muttered. "Olaf the Big saw King Cnut's dragon fleet and he ran, the coward."

"I counted three score dragon ships. Mayhap I would have turned tail too." Jarvik's lips flattened. "King Olaf commands a pithy dozen ships. When all the jarls refused to provide *leidang* to triple that number, defeat was cert."

"Aye, and when a score of us offered Cnut the Great *leidang*, Olaf the Big had no choice but to flee." Torsten folded the note and tucked it into a pouch that he placed into a box on a small table.

"Sigrid's presence troubles and puzzles me." Ruard jammed a shoulder into the hut's wall and crossed one ankle over the other.

"Sigrid is not to be trusted," Jarvik growled. "Gossip has it that he felled Hadrain of Cumbria."

"Nay!" Torsten bounded out of his chair. "Poison?"

"Tis suspected. Hadrain had seen many years, but was hale. His sudden illness after a visit from Sigrid sowed rumors. Court gossip speaks of Sigrid's lust for your new wife. 'Tis said he tumbles any maid with gold hair and green eyes." Jarvik let the chair thud to the floor. "And I like not the way he eyes your wife's sons."

Torsten paced a tight circle. "As to my newly acquired sons, there is much I need tell you both."

Picking his words carefully, Torsten told them of Ainslin's maidenhood.

"A wife of four years a virgin bride." Ruard winked at Torsten. "That the gods strike me with such fortune."

"What of the sons I escorted here?" Jarvik rubbed the back of his neck. "I like not this news."

"That no man save me has touched her is a boon." He hesitated, then added, "Sigrid raped Ainslin's maid, Greta."

Jarvik groaned.

Torsten told them the rest of the tale, and his brothers lapsed into silence.

"Did you burn the sheets?" Ruard, always the one to tie loose knots, asked.

"None would dare enter my lodge," Torsten declared. "But I yield to your wisdom. See you two to Sigrid. Dog his footsteps. I will attend to the bloodied sheets."

The three brothers left the lodge at the same time.

"I do not see him," muttered Ruard when they entered Bear Hall.

The hairs on Torsten's nape bristled. "Ainslin." He sprinted out of the longhouse.

"My stallion's tethered out front," Jarvik yelled.

Precious moments elapsed before Torsten dug his heels into the horse's flanks. He galloped to his lodge, flung out of the saddle, took the five stairs in one leap, and threw open the door.

Ainslin rose from a chair, and when their gazes met, he recognized the panic in her eyes.

"My lord, Earl Sigrid visits to see our children, but the boys are sleeping."

By Odin, his wife had the courage and discipline of a true warrior. How she had persuaded the talkative twins to quiet he knew not, but twas clear she had. Her bravery outshone her beauty. Not a smidgen of fear showed on her face.

Torsten clenched his jaw when he saw that Sigrid occupied the seat where he'd fed Ainslin last night.

Robyn stood beside Ainslin, his dark brows meeting, and one hand resting on the tip of Ainslin's chair.

Torsten glance trapped the steward's, and he gave the him a surreptitious nod of approval.

"Tis time for the feasting to begin," Torsten said. "You know not our customs, Sigrid, so I will forgive this infraction. A visit to a jarl's lodge is by invitation of the jarl."

Sigrid slowly unwound his limbs from the chair, his mouth pinched, fingers flexing.

Behind Torsten's back Jarvik spoke. "I am come to meet my new sister."

More to stop me from shredding Sigrid's limbs from his torso.

Sigrid's lust shone like jewels sparkling under a desert sun, his nostrils flared and he made no attempt to conceal the cockstand tenting his tunic.

Rage had Torsten clamping his hand around his sword's hilt.

"Brother." Ruard's growled greeting pierced the red haze darkening Torsten's sight. Ruard clamped Torsten's wrist in warning.

Jarvik walked to Ainslin, captured her hand and brought it to his lips.

"My brother is indeed blessed by the gods. Welcome, sister."

Sigrid's glance flickered to Torsten, his mouth curled in a half sneer, but his tone dripped honey when he spoke. "Lady Ainslin and I were neighbors. I sought to give her news of family and friends. By your leave, I will await you in the hall."

Jarvik escorted Ainslin to the hall, with Torsten and Ruard trailing their footsteps.

"I will sever his cock." Torsten fingered the oval stones adorning the handle of his sword.

"She has eyes only for you. Her face fair lit when she saw you," Ruard mused. "Did I not tell you training her to hand would win her favor?"

Rolling his eyes, Torsten replied, "Aye 'twould seem a falcon's training works with a woman."

"Accustom her to your touch, feed her, bathe her, and trust will come."

Torsten's good humor returned. "Think you she will hunt for me too? Fell prey with one snap?"

"Tis you who are felled," Ruard retorted. "As am I. Thor's hammer is no match for lust for only one woman. Well I remember the days before such misfortune struck me. Tell me, can you countenance the notion of sheathing your prick in other than Ainslin?"

Stunned, Torsten stared into his brother's blue eyes. Words failed him. For he had not tupp'd a woman from the day he set eyes on Ainslin of Durham.

Chapter Five

Ainslin speared thread through the eye of the whalebone needle. Heat climbed her throat and face as another eye filled her mind, the weeping slit on the crown of Torsten's cock. He had not allowed her to taste his honey in the bathhouse or early this morn, when he'd pleased her again.

Will he enjoy my tongue as I do his? I vow to all that is holy, I will please Torsten of Bear Hall. He will have no cause to set us aside.

The fire Robyn built earlier crackled and popped. Ainslin shrugged the furs from her shoulders when the logs burst into flames. Earlier, she'd taken a length of scarlet silk, given her by Ælfgifu as part of her dowry, and cut a tunic for Torsten. The brilliant color and the pattern she'd chosen would add to his regal arrogance and highlight the blue glints in his black hair. Inspecting the line of gold stitches for any unevenness, she smiled, picturing Ruard and Torsten side by side.

Angel and Devil from their coloring—the one so fair, the other so dark. The planes and angles of Torsten's chiseled features didn't conjure the word handsome, yet her sex—she blushed—her puss wept remembering his wicked grin when he glanced at her from between her thighs. She cared not to know if the act 'twas a sin, and had already decided not to mention any intimacy between them in confession.

She heard a door creak open and hastily hid the tunic in her trunk. Looking around the room, she took a deep inhale, hoping her efforts would please Torsten. Her dowry carts had arrived with the twins, and she'd pressed Robyn into service. Tapestries hung on the walls, embroidered pillows plied the bench and chairs, two additional rugs carpeted the floor. Silver goblets, green glasses, clay plates and stone bowls lay on the table.

A three-drawer oak chest, Hadrain's morning gift to her, stood to the left of the bed. A draft of cold air snaked across the chamber, and the blazing fire bent in the opposite direction as the door opened. Ainslin shifted to face her husband. Excitement sang through her veins as she drank him in. He filled the room to overflowing. The scent of him swarmed her flesh—leather, smoke, and some male tang that made her mouth water.

"To me, Ainslin." His deep voice fired an ache between her legs.

She fair glided to him, unable to stop staring into his storm-clouded eyes. He stood, arms akimbo, dressed in a brown tunic, tight chausses of the same color and black boots laced in the front. "Our children, Robyn and Eileen, are quartered in a cottage close to the longhouse for this night. We leave on the

morrow for Trondhjem, for King Cnut's coronation. He honors us after with a marriage mass, that all may witness our union."

She frowned, unsure how to take the news.

"Tis good, Ainslin." Framing her face, he bent to brush his lips over hers.

Sighing into the caress, she set her hands on his chest.

"Even if Sigrid suspects the truth, he will not gainsay Cnut the Great's public blessing of our union."

"I thank you, my lord," she whispered, tears pooling in her eyes. "Not simply for arranging such an honor, but for claiming Brom and Rob as yours, and for allowing me my Christian faith."

He folded her in his arms, one hand stroking her side, the other cupping her bottom. "You are mine, Ainslin, as are Brom and Rob. I protect you all to the death." His thumb swiped an escaping tear. "What ails you, *elska*?"

Ainslin had to swallow three times. "Not many warriors accept another's child. 'Tis more than I could ever hope for, yet..." she searched his eyes, praying he understood her hesitation. "I did not birth Brom and Rob."

"But you love them as a mother would, nay?" He tangled his fingers in her hair.

She nodded.

"Tis all I require," he said. "You please me, Ainslin."

The knots in her stomach loosened, and the flare of desire in his eyes made her bold. She tiptoed and touched her lips to his, sipping the soft, smooth skin, tasting the wine he'd drunk. Moving to deepen the kiss, she angled her head, and the slight beard on his chin tickled her mouth.

He drew away and met her gaze, his quick breaths fanning her moistened flesh. His nostrils flared, he glanced down, sucked in a breath and rasped, "Tis a feast for my eyes, Ainslin."

She'd chosen a sheer chemise, the hems, neck and sleeves embroidered with green ivy leaves, hoping he'd understand her signal. His jaw clenched and a muscle under his eye jumped.

"We can join Torsten," she whispered, dropping her focus to his neck, to the rapid throbbing at the center of his throat. "I—"

Instantly, he swept her off her feet, and his mouth covered hers. He stalked to the bed and sat heavily on the mattress. His tongue delved inside, sweeping the edges of her teeth, stroking the inside of her cheek. His hands fumbled at the tie holding the thin chemise together. Every touch, every caress, had her belly rippling, her toes curling and uncurling; she fisted her hands in his tunic, and tugged him closer.

Torsten broker the kiss, his rapid breathing flickering fiery streams of air across the tops of her bared breasts. His gray eyes had darkened to coal. He helped to her feet, slid the chemise down to her waist, over her hips, and the garment fluttered to the skins beneath her bare feet. Her shoulders hunched, and she fought the urge to cover her mound and breasts.

"Nay, Ainslin, never hide the glory of your body from me. 'Tis for me to worship, to pleasure, to taste," he murmured, his hands moving to the roundness of her flesh, thumbs rubbing her nipples.

"Torsten," she moaned, her knees gave way, and she rested her palms on his shoulders.

He tugged her close, and set his mouth to the valley between her breasts, suckling and licking the undersides. Suddenly he stilled, and the chamber grew silent but for the snapping fire.

Ainslin blinked and stared at the inky hair covering his head, all the confidence she'd gathered flying to the far ends of the Norse lands.

I am too bold. Eileen is wrong.

When he chuckled, ice coated her feet and hands, and she yearned to crawl into her trunk and slam the lid closed. Torsten must have felt her rigidity, for he nuzzled her belly button, and then looked up at her, a wide smile dominating his face.

At once, his expression changed, he muttered something she didn't catch in Norse, and stood, framing her face with both hands. She didn't want to see his displeasure and kept her gaze on his square chin.

"To me, Ainslin," he crooned. "'Tis many winters long past I near spilled my seed in my breeches. 'Tis the reason I halted, elska."

She peeked at him.

His thumb crept across the seam of her mouth.

"The náttverðr strung too long, this eve." He slipped a finger between her lips, "I speared a choice morsel, but had no thought, no taste for food, only for your mouth, your tits, your puss. I near sprinted to the lodge."

Every word he spoke melted her stiffness. Tentatively, she touched her tongue to his finger's tip, and sucked.

He groaned, gathered her into his embrace, and placed her on top of the skins on the bed. The warm fur felt wickedly delicious against her bottom, and Ainslin wriggled into the plush softness. She devoured the muscled definition of his chest when he tore off his tunic, his belt having flown across the chamber and clattered on the table after he'd shucked his boots off and kicked them out of his way.

Ainslin remembered the eve before, when he'd draped his tunic and stacked his boots, his movements unhurried, ordered. A grin tugged at her lips, and her womanly parts preened, back arching, nipples pouting, feet flexing, and her sex wept, the nub there tingling, craving his firm tongue, his sharp teeth.

Torsten came down over her, his knee nudging her legs apart, his mouth fastening on a breast, and she cried out when he drew in the point and grazed the burning flesh. Her body knew what happened next, and moisture drenched her folds.

"Mine," he growled, his rumble skittering heat across the damp bud of her breast. He lapped the peak, and his rough tongue singed her to her core. Ainslin cupped his cock with her mound, rubbing from side to side, an inarticulate plea for possession.

"Nay," he muttered, giving her breast one last lingering lick before rolling them over.

"Do we stop?" she wailed, and tried to catch her breath, pushing up and resting her palms on his hard chest.

"I will not injure you again, Ainslin," He panted between the words, his voice coarse and husky. Lifting her above his rigid cock, he shifted her back and forth, teasing her swollen folds.

"I beg you, Torsten." She struggled to close the gap between them and let out a long moan when she felt his stiff prick easing inside her throbbing channel.

"To you, Ainslin. I yield to you. Set the pace," he urged, loosening his grip on her hips.

She closed her eyes at the ecstasy, sinking down on his cock, bliss oozing as his sex stretched her to bursting, the sensation at once both agony and rapture. The need to move drove her to glide up and down his organ, and her breathing faltered when he tweaked her nipples.

Her chest burned, she rode him faster, her inner walls clamped at his prick gainsaying the excruciating rhythm of plunder and retreat. She wanted, nay needed, the release just out of her reach. His thumb found her hooded nub, and he pinched. Ainslin screamed his name as the peak claimed her, shuddering and convulsing around his cock. He held her hips and continued to thrust, lifting her off the mattress as he spilled his seed inside her, and another release wracked her body.

* * *

Torsten glimpsed the Jarl of Lade's hall in the distance and stifled the instinct to turn about and return to the safety and seclusion of Bjarndýr Skáli. Sigrid had a half day lead on them, but he hadn't wanted to hurry Ainslin, knowing her puss was swollen and tender from the eve before.

Glancing behind to see her laughing while riding side by side with Ruard, his grip on the reins inadvertently tightened, and his steed, Prúðr, snorted his disapproval.

Jarvik, cantering on his left, taunted, "Tis a dastardly matter to see you brought so low as to be jealous of your own brother."

"I will see you in practice on the morrow," Torsten vowed. "I welcome the day you meet your bride."

"Many moons will pass afore such happens—you have yet to settle Ruard."

"Tis time you learn to gather knowledge afore spilling nonsense," Torsten chided. "Ruard received a missive from the king last eve. His alliance is arranged."

Pulling up short Jarvik exclaimed, "Nay!"

"Aye," Torsten retorted and kicked his horse into a gallop. "Cnut the Great has already settled yours," he yelled, glancing over his shoulder, and breaking into a grin.

They arrived to find the jarl himself, Eiríkr Hákonarson, the leader of the Norse nobles who'd refused to support King Olaf against Cnut the Great's invasion, addressing a contingent of his *hird* in a secluded corner of the practice field. The minute Eirkr spied Torsten and Jarvik, he dismissed the assembled delegation of his warrior army and strode to greet them.

The Hákonarson and Østberg lines fostered first sons with each other's families. Eirkr and Torsten, both younger sons, had fostered together at Thorkell the Tall's holdings before being called to battle by King Cnut.

Known for favoring bedsport above all but ruling Trøndelag and leading his hird to battle, Eirkr grinned at Torsten, his smile both lascivious and taunting. "Has the fair Ainslin the Frigid arrived?"

"Speak you that name once again, and I will see you in practice on the morn," Torsten snapped.

Before he could say more, Jarvik retorted, "From the moans and screams last eve, 'twould seem envious gossip fostered that title. Though my knowledge be only secondhand—"

"Desist!" Torsten roared, leapt off his steed and grabbed the reins of his brother's horse, startling the stallion into a rear and tumbling Jarvik to the hard earth. The tussle that ensued involved every warrior in the vicinity and proved particularly satisfying.

Darkness had long fallen when Torsten made his way to the chamber assigned to him and Ainslin. Finding the chamber devoid of any but Martha, he discovered King Cnut's archbishop had commanded her to confession. Torsten cursed heartily while bathing and dressing, and continued swearing when he burst into the great hall to find the seating divided, jarls and nobility on either side of Cnut, wives seated at the table below to the right.

Torsten's gaze kept returning to Ainslin. She conversed little, ate mere morsels, drank even less, and sent him furtive glances through the meal. When the lawgiver rose to recite the Øre-Thing meeting bylaws, the king's handfast wife, Ælfgifu, led the women from the hall. The lawgiver began the Øre-Thing by declaring Cnut King of Norway and when all the jarls had pledged their fealty, the new king pronounced judgment over a score of petty disputes.

Hours later, when Torsten returned to their room, he found his wife crouched over a chamber pot, her complexion tinged green, her hair plastered to her cheeks. His heart stopped beating, and he consumed the distance between them, stooping and curling an arm around her shoulders. "What ails you, Ainslin?"

She moaned and shook her head cupping a hand over her mouth.

He lurched to his feet, poured a glass of ale and returned to her side.

"Beg pardon, my lord," she croaked, some time later, after the last contents of her stomach filled the stone bowl. Color returned to her skin, but not a healthy rose as before, more a slash of painful scarlet. "'Tis my courses. I am always ill during this time. I have asked Martha to find us another room or pallet for the night."

"Nay," he murmured, gathering into his embrace. "You stay with me and I will play maid."

Chapter Six

King Cnut and Ælfgifu had been well pleased with Ainslin and Torsten's Christian marriage.

Sigrid had proved no danger after the king dubbed him Jarl of the Orkneys.

Ainslin had blossomed like a daisy in spring after they returned to Bjarndýr Skáli. In truth, those months of the lands' awakening to the sun had been a boon Torsten had never expected. His lust for his wife swelled with each joining, his desire never slaked, simply stoked higher with each new dawn. As the planted wheat crops burst through the rich soil, so did her trust in him, and the intimacy between them ripened to an unspoken love.

Brom and Rob shot up with the fresh green stalks, their chubby legs shedding fat and developing muscles as Torsten and his brothers began their training for fostering.

'Twas nigh on midsummer, and Torsten could take his wife's suffering no longer. For too long, he'd watched helpless as his wife grew more despondent when her courses descended. Not only did her laugh dim, but the sickness that accompanied her courses lasted longer and became more intense.

He decided to remove her from Bjarndýr Skáli for a sennight or two.

"Are you cert, brother?" Jarvik asked.

"Aye. 'Tis will do her good to be in the mountains. Watch my sons well," Torsten replied, glancing to Ainslin mounted on a prancing chestnut mare.

Jarvik followed his gaze and nodded. "Go, I will ensure no harm befalls Brom and Rob."

The five-day journey to his lodge in the interior seemed to lift Ainslin's spirits.

Ainslin's eyes brightened when they reached *Sumar Söngur*, and she quickly became absorbed in decorating the sparse one-room lodge, cooking, cleaning and planning an addition so they could bring the boys the following summer. Her green eyes regained their twinkle, her cheeks their rosy hue, after a week of swimming, cavorting and tugging in the lake, on the sandy banks and beside the blazing fireplace in the lodge.

He yearned to take her in full sunlight, on the crest of the mountain in the soft grasses.

"Nay," she protested, her cheeks all aglow. "'Tis midday, Torsten, and we are in the middle of a field."

“Aye,” he whispered, pressing openmouthed kisses on her nape and throat.

Ainslin batted at him, but when he suckled on that spot between neck and shoulder that never failed to make her whimper and surrender, she sighed and touched her mouth to his jaw, grazing the hard bone there, licking his flesh soothingly.

’Twas a long loving, and with each caress, tenderness flooded his soul. When she found her pleasure under the hot sun, her eyes going unfocused, her lips crying his name, he could no longer hold back and spilled his seed in her convulsing sheath.

The long grasses shielded their skin from the noonday’s rays. They lay together, still joined, she on top, and Torsten couldn’t remember a more content, satisfied moment. He had fallen in love with his wife, and he cared not who knew.

She brushed her lips on the spot beneath which his heart pounded, and pressed so she leaned one forearm on his ribs, her weight too slight to cause any discomfort.

“Elska?” he murmured, beckoning sleep weighting his eyelids.

“I have a confession to make, my lord,” she whispered, staring at his jaw.

Instantly the warrior in him roared to the forefront, the lover and husband subdued. He relaxed the tension building in his muscles and continued his unhurried caressing of her spine. “Aye, and well I know to what sin you seek to confess, you wrung me drier than big-hand Dorna.”

’Twas a common jest that the milkmaid, Dorna, could pleasure a warrior in mere seconds, her secret stroking rhythm and magical hands deemed to be a gift from the goddess Freya.

Ainslin didn’t smile as he expected, but bit her bottom lip, and then muttered, “You must cast me aside, Torsten. I fear I will not bear you an heir.”

His heart lurched and it took all his warrior will power not to roar, not to hunt an enemy to battle to the death, because he knew not how to conquer the defeat in her tone. The sun’s rays lit the grass buds golden, birds chirped a merry tune, not a cloud marred the azure sky, yet midnight darkness and despair shrouded him.

Torsten sat up, tangling his fingers in her curls, tilting her face so she had to meet his gaze. “It matters not Ainslin. I fear I love you, and I will never let you go. You are the sun and the stars in my life, and I would rather see Valhalla on the morrow than spend a moment without you and our sons.”

Tears streamed her cheeks. "Tis my fault," she asserted. "I watched Greta die after she bore Brom and Rob, and I have been terrified of birthing a child. My fear prevents your seed from taking fruit. You must seek another wife."

He cupped her face with both hands. "Answer me this, Ainslin of Durham, do you love me?"

A sad smile curved her mouth. "Aye Torsten. I love you too much to be your fruitless wife."

"Mayhap the blame lies with me," he said, having thought of this ploy after hearing her tell Martha almost the same exact phrase. "I have lain with many women since gaining my manhood, and not one has born a child."

'Twas the truth and not the truth. The maid who'd trained him to bedsport had died in childbirth, as had the widow who'd taken her place. Then he'd traveled to the East, and learned many ways to prevent a child from growing inside a woman's womb, sponges soaked in vinegar, using pig casings to capture his seed.

Surprise had her blinking rapidly. She shook her head. "Nay, you strive to make light of this, my most grievous failure."

"Ainslin, to me," he ordered when she avoided his eyes. "'Tis a joining I will remember for my lifetime. Under the sun, in the meadows, you have confessed your love for me, and I, mine for you. Desist, wife. No other can take your place." He captured her hand and set her palm to his chest. "My heart beats for you Ainslin. For you and no other."

"Torsten—"

"Nay," he stated. "From the moment I set eyes on you, this," he said, drawing her hand to where they were joined, placing her thumb on the base of his cock, "has wanted no other. My brothers tease me relentlessly, for I have tupp'd no one but you since then."

She burst into tears, and he comforted her by tupp'ing her again and again until her mood lightened. The sun had waned by the time they hiked back to the lodge. He loved her on the straw mattress, on the skins in front of the fire, in the bathhouse adjacent to the lodge. He hunted, she cooked, and they swam together in the shallow lake at the foot of the mountain.

One dawn ran into another, and 'twas only when Torsten calculated the nights they'd been away that he realized the time for her courses had come and gone. The days stretched into a sennight and then another. Torsten fair held his breath every morn, waiting for the sickness to start, for her courses to appear.

Jarvik sent a messenger with a missive full of concern. Not trusting such a special suspicion to paper, Torsten replied vaguely, commanding his brother to expect them in another sennight or two.

Time passed, still Ainslin's courses did not occur, and Torsten noted subtle changes in his wife. Emotions skittered to the surface at odd moments. She found a fuzzy starling with a broken wing and nursed the young bird with milk-soaked bread, and then sobbed when the creature died. One moment she was giddy with good cheer like a young girl on the burst of womanhood, the next she shed tears because of the beauty of the lake's waters sparkling under the sun.

When her belly rounded under his caresses, the slight swell made his heart pound, and he knew not what to do—keep her at Sumar Söngur or return to Bear Hall.

The first morn she awoke and instantly emptied her stomach, he watched her intently, waiting for her to recognize the obvious. The day passed, and the following morn, the same pattern repeated. On the third morn, after her sickness subsided and she set a cauldron of water to boil, she sat by the fire and hugged her knees.

"Torsten?" The half-whispered query made his mouth go dry. "I have not had my courses. And yet I am sick like I am when they come."

Finally. He repressed a sigh and hurried to her, cradling her in his arms. "To me, Ainslin." When her gaze met his, he said, "You should have had your courses the week we journeyed here."

Her green eyes widened to fill her face, the hope in the gold glints highlighted by the fire's flames turned his heart over in his chest. "I am with child." She glanced at her belly and her hands curved protectively over the roundness there. "'Think you 'tis true?"

Torsten could see she held her breath awaiting his reply. "Aye, Ainslin, wife, and the love of my life, you are with child."

Much later, after a magical, slow loving, when they lay naked in each other's arms before a glowing fire, she murmured sleepily, "We must get back to Bear Hall. I will have need of Martha's special tonic now."

The hairs on the back of his neck rose like a black bear's hackles as he remembered Martha insisting Ainslin drink the tonic she brewed. When he'd questioned Martha on the tea, the nurse replied that the tonic helped ease Ainslin's difficult courses.

Torsten toyed with Ainslin's hair until he felt her muscles slacken and he knew she verged on slumber. "Did Martha accompany you, Greta, Robyn and Eileen to Wales?"

"Course," she murmured, snuggling closer to his side. "Martha is a midwife. She oversaw Brom and Rob's birth."

* * *

Torsten sent missives to Jarvik and Ruard with strict instructions. When they arrived at Bear Hall, Jarvik informed them that Martha had been called back to Durham to assist her ailing sister.

Ainslin fretted and worried for the first few days.

Helga departed a week later for the Danish courts to wed her husband, and she turned over the keys to the Bjarndýr Skáli to Ainslin.

His wife bloomed after she assumed her new responsibilities. The quality and taste of the food in the hall went from dismal to that of a king's castle. Not a blade of grass in the entire settlement of Stjórardalr was spared her attention.

Summer faded into fall, the leaves on trees turned splendid hues of orange, rust and brown. The air grew chilly, Brom and Rob sprouted like weeds, and Ainslin's belly rounded and plumped.

Ruard returned from carrying Martha to Wales before the first snowfall. Torsten rode to the harbor to greet him. They braved the chill breezes off Trondhjemsfjorden to walk to the town's inn. Seated next to a roaring fire, cradling two mugs of ale, they spoke of Cnut's court, the latest appointments and the changes to Bear Hall.

"What of Martha?" Torsten asked.

Ruard twisted his mouth. "She confessed she fed Ainslin the brew to prevent a child. She claims she did this out of concern for Ainslin's fear of birthing."

Torsten cursed.

"Martha cannot return to Stjórardalr, brother."

"She will never set foot on this land," Torsten vowed. "Ainslin knows nothing, and I would have this so until after the birthing."

"Ælfifu sends a midwife to attend Ainslin. The ship carrying her is but two days behind us. Rest easy, brother, this midwife's a renowned healer. 'Tis said she works magic with difficult births."

“I want not magic,” Torsten growled. “I want a wife who lives. And if Odin sees fit to let my child live also, I will make the appropriate sacrifice.”

Epilogue

Bjarndýr Skáli, 1029 A.D. Spring

Fields had been ploughed, the gentle rains nourished wheat grains into tender sprouts, swallows and sparrows built nests in bough branches, the air hummed with spring song, chirps, toad croaks, piglets squealing. Torsten surveyed his lands and felt well content, the mild spring weather a harbinger of a bountiful fall harvest. The tentative peace that had settled over the lands after King Cnut's coronation still held.

Ainslin had safely birthed a girl child, Inga, a raven-haired babe with emerald eyes, dimples, and a gurgling laugh that never failed to make his stomach clench. Jarvik and Ruard teased him mercilessly about his entrancement and swore last eve that if he mentioned his daughter more than thrice a meal, they would both take him on the training ground.

The dusting of misty clouds sparing him the full heat of the sun vanished as a strong east-west breeze cleared the blue skies. Torsten shifted restlessly in the saddle and abruptly called off his inspection of his tenant farms. He touched his heels to Prúðr's flanks, the stallion broke into a gallop, and steed and jarl raced to his lodge.

He dismounted, jaunted the five steps to the landing, and threw open the pine door. He grinned when he found chamber after chamber empty, knowing where he would find his family. Ainslin had discovered the hot springs that fed the bathhouse also fed the lagoon located in a nook in the mountainside. During her pregnancy, they had spent many memorable nights and days of pleasure in the shallow pool.

Bursting around the bend, he drank in the sight of his wife, daughter, and two sons cavorting in the warm waters.

"Papa," Rob squealed. "Inga belched like a warrior."

He glanced to Ainslin, who grimaced and said, "She did, but mayhap her new brother will belch louder."

"New brother?" He hardly dared hope.

"Or sister, we shall know by first snowfall," Ainslin replied gifting him with the beatific smile of the virgin who'd come to his bed many moons ago.

The End

~ About the Author ~

I'm an Iron Chef America and Law and Order addict who loves to cook, eat, and read. I wish you could burn a ton of calories being sedentary and eating. Don't you?

Married for thirty-four years to an amazing man who still astounds me every single day, I'm also the proud mama of three fantastic sons, all of whom are now of legal age. If only they'd stop changing majors in college...

I grew up on the Caribbean island of Trinidad where the population is representative of almost every race and nation on the planet, so multiculturalism oozes from my pores. Though I attended an all-girl Catholic school run by nuns, we were taught all religions, Hinduism, Muslim, Buddhism, and celebrated all the holidays associated with those religions. Did you know many delish foods go with religious holidays?

Alpha males, strong heroines, exotic locations, and cultural differences are my forte. And from Monaco, to Trinidad at Carnival time, to rural Washington, to Denali National Park in Alaska, to Sleeping Dog, Texas and Norway in 1028 AD, I'm travelling the world through my books, and sharing my view of it with readers.

My writing career began in 2008, and since then I've been lucky enough to have nine books published. Two more, including my first historical, will release at the end of 2010, and I currently have six manuscripts in progress.

One of the most rewarding aspects of writing is hearing from readers, and nothing makes my day more than an email from someone who's read one of my books. I love to hear what tickles someone's fancy. So far, I've heard from readers from almost every continent on the planet. Almost...

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