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About the Author
Also by Joanna Bell
I arrived back in 2017 wet-cheeked and in an emotional shock so profound I barely recognized it for what it was. And then I lay on the ground beside the tree for who knows how long, panting like a cornered animal as my mind tried to reconcile what just happened to me.

And what had just happened? If I wasn't insane, or under the influence of some new designer psychedelic, it seemed that my best friend Paige Renner had taken me briefly back to the 9th century, so I could see that she, her baby and her father were happy, and that they had chosen to stay in the past. She did it so I could have some peace of mind, so I wouldn't spend the rest of my life assuming some terrible fate had befallen them.

I'd been robotic during our goodbyes – and during the short time I'd spent in the place whose existence I had flatly and resolutely disbelieved in when Paige first told me about it. And now I was flat on my back in the middle of the woods in 2017, out of breath although I hadn't been running and conscious of my brain looping helplessly round and round an irreconcilable pair of facts: first, my intellectual knowledge that time travel wasn't possible and, second, the reports of my five senses over the course of the afternoon. These reports were unambiguous – not only was time travel possible, I'd experienced it. It had just happened to me.

At first there had been nothingness – only the dark, airless whoosh that enveloped my entire body when I lay my bare hands on the tree. It would have had me clawing at my throat in a panic had it lasted even 1 second longer than it did. And after that there was another wood – not the one I had been in a moment before. This new wood was thicker, darker, and there was no ambient traffic noise in the background. There was, however, something familiar about it. It was the smell – the acrid wood-smoke, the faint marine tang of the ocean. My body knew I was in England, thousands of miles away from New York State – where I been only moments before – before my mind was prepared to accept it. England. Home.

But the people Paige introduced me to were not like any Englishmen I had ever met. Their accents were thick and almost impenetrable, they were short and dirty and strangely careworn in a way I was used to seeing only in the very, very old and even then only in those who had lived hard lives.

Paige can't have arranged all that, I thought to myself as the stars winked into life
over my head in the present time. There's no drug that could do that, no magic trick. It must have been real – even though it can't have been real.

Eventually, getting cold, I staggered to my feet and made my way slowly and quietly back up to the Renner's house – a house that looked even darker and emptier now that I knew its occupants were never coming back – and to my car, which I had parked a little ways down the road so as to avoid the attentions of the reporters who were still camped out on the property next door, hoping to get a shot of Paige with her baby son.

But just as I turned the engine on the interior of my little Volkswagen Golf was suddenly brightly lit and a second later the sounds of running footsteps and shouted questions filled my ears.

"Have you seen Paige Renner?"
"Have you seen her baby?"
"Can we ask you a couple of questions?"

When one of them recognized me and began to pound on the driver's side window, yelling my name, I slammed the car into gear and gunned it away from there as fast as I could, shaking with what I wasn't sure was the chilly evening or the experience I'd just been through or the sheer, predatory intensity of the reporters. The media knew who I was, they'd followed me home a few times on campus and hassled a few of Paige's other friends. I was even aware that I played quite a prominent role in some of the crazier conspiracy theories online – my favorite of which must have been the one that claimed I was an inter-dimensional being, sent to earth to befriend human women and facilitate their impregnation by an alien race.

I smiled as I zoomed down the dark country lanes outside River Forks and tried to picture the looks on the faces of all those internet crazies if they knew the actual truth.

If I'd known what was coming – and maybe I should have – I can tell you, I wouldn't have been smiling. The next few days probably looked uneventful from the outside. It was the beginning of my senior year at university in America, and the routine of going to classes, seeing friends, studying, was starting to settle into me again after the summer. What happened to me that afternoon with Paige Renner and her dad put a stop to any of that collegiate normality. I went to my classes out of habit, walking unseeingly across the gorgeous old campus as the first yellowed leaves of autumn floated down around me, trying to think of anything but the impossible thing that had happened to me and failing completely. People noticed. Friends noticed. When they asked me what was wrong I lied and told them it was nothing, I was just nervous about my future, wondering whether I should apply to graduate schools in America or back in the UK.

Is this how Paige felt? I asked myself, wracked with guilt at how I'd reacted to her confession that she'd spent most of her life time-traveling back to 9th century England. Did she feel this alone? Like she was going to burst with the secret she knew she couldn't tell anyone? Well – until she told me and I treated her like a crazy person.

A few days after the trip, as I had begun to refer to it in my own mind – because calling it a 'trip' made it sound almost mundane, like a trip to the shops, or the beach, or, you know, the 9th freaking century – my parents called on a Wednesday night. They usually called me on Sunday nights. When I asked my mother what was wrong, she didn't
reply right away. When she did, she told me she had been about to ask me the same thing.

"What?" I asked her, confused. "Why would something be wrong with me? Why are you --"

"Well, your friend Jenny called us," my mother started. "She called us last night and --"

"Wait. Jenny called you? When? Why?"

Jenny was one of my closest friends at Grand Northeastern – probably my closest friend now Paige was gone – and the only other English person I knew in America. She was from Liverpool and she had an earthy northern-ness about her that I had liked right off the bat. But what the hell was she doing calling my parents?

"Oh she was sure it was nothing to be worried about," my mother replied breezily, the way she does when things are anything but breezy. "She just thought that, uh, she thought maybe there was something upsetting you. That you seemed a little quieter than usual."

My mum was full of it. I knew it, and she must have known I knew it. My parents are the opposite of the classic American 'helicopter' stereotype – their whole deal from the time I was very small was to avoid coddling me, to allow me to learn independence, to refrain from protecting me when it came time to learn hard lessons. My parents didn't call out of the blue because someone told them I seemed 'quieter' than usual.

"I don't even know what that means," I answered, annoyed at Jenny for meddling. And then, when I tried to continue my sentence, to crack some joke about Jenny being a little dramatic, something awful happened. My words stuck in my throat suddenly and I realized with some small degree of horror that I was on the verge of crying.

"What is it?" My mother asked, hearing the way my voice had trailed off into a weird strangled noise before I could finish speaking. "Emma?"

I swallowed once, and then again. I blinked my eyes. I breathed in, slowly, and then out again. Nothing helped. The lump in my throat got bigger. What the hell was I doing? Crying? What the bloody hell was I crying about? I think I was even more astonished than my mother was.

"Sorry," I whispered. "I'm sorry Mum, I'm --"

"Emma!" My mother exclaimed, having it confirmed by my pathetic whispering that I was in fact weeping. "Darling, you must tell us what's going on right now! It's been years since I heard you crying, Em. Come on, out with it. What's gotten my lovely girl so emotional?"

I didn't quite know the answer to that question. Was it the trip with Paige? It must have been. But why was it manifesting itself in these sudden, embarrassing tears? I didn't know that, either. What I was definitely did know was that I couldn't tell my parents the truth – not unless I wanted them to react the way I had when Paige told me. Not unless I wanted them to think I was losing my marbles. No. So I had to tell them something else.

In the end I came up with some ridiculous and barely believable story about being worried about my grades and whether or not I was going to get into the graduate school of my choice. Not that I had ever worried about my grades before in my entire life. It was just what popped into my head that evening, as I tried desperately to reassure my
mother that I wasn't about to have some sort of emotional breakdown.

She didn't believe me. Neither did my dad. I could hear it in their voices. But as I couldn't tell them the truth and as I think they sensed they weren't going to get any further information out of me that night, we ended the call a short while later and I retreated to my tiny little student bedroom to worry about whether or not I was going to have that breakdown.

Less than two minutes later, my phone rang again and my heart skipped a beat when I saw the name on the screen:

River Forks Police Department

My thumb shook wildly as I took the call, instantly regretting not letting it go to voicemail when my voice proved just as shaky as the rest of me.

"H – Hello?"

"Is this Emma Wallis?"

I swallowed hard, and my throat made an audible clicking sound. "Yes."

"Ms. Wallis, this is Sergeant Halson with the River Forks Police Department, we're just wondering if we can ask you a few questions about your friend Paige Renner?"

Damnit. I could have kicked myself. Of course the police – of course everyone – was eventually going to notice that Paige was missing again. And that this time she was missing along with her newborn son and her father. If I hadn't been so busy obsessing about what had happened to me, I would have been more conscious of this.

"Um" I stammered, worried that I sounded guilty even as I knew I hadn't done anything wrong. "Um – yes. Yes, sure. That's fine."

Sergeant Halson paused, which I interpreted as him noticing how nervous I sounded – and that just made me even more nervous. "OK Ms. Wallis. It's just that no one has heard from Paige – or her father – for a few days now. We're going to send someone around to the house for a welfare check but I'm just calling a few of her friends first, to see if they have any information."

My body was hot and cold at the same time. Was I going to have to lie to this man – a police officer? I was. Why hadn't I thought of this earlier? Why hadn't I prepared for this?

"OK."

"Can you tell me when the last time you saw Ms. Renner was?"

"It was a few days ago. At her house. At, uh – at her dad's house."

"And can you give me an exact date if you can, Ms. Wallis?"

Sergeant Halson wasn't being overbearing or unkind, but there was a seriousness in his voice that unsettled me. I could have given him an exact date, but I chose to keep things vague, to give myself some time to come up with a workable story.

"I'm not sure – um, it was recently, though. She was with her son and her dad. It was at their house."

"Yes you already said that."

"Oh, did I?"

"Yes."

A light sweat broke out on my forehead but I wrestled myself into what could pass for composure and didn't say anything further. A short, awkward silence ensued before the
officer spoke again:

"Alright Ms. Wallis – thank you for your help. I trust you won't mind if we get in touch again, if we have any difficulty reaching your friend?"

"No," I replied as a knot of dread formed in my stomach. "No, that would be fine."

When the call was over I lay back on my bed, fruitlessly trying to get the jumbled mess of thoughts in my mind into some kind of order. That cop was going to call back, that much was certain. Because Paige wasn't going to show up, and neither was her father or her son. Sooner or later – and probably sooner, given the interest in the whole saga of Paige Renner and her mysterious, previously temporary disappearance – everyone was going to realize that she was gone again. And then they were going to lose their minds. Police, media, the public – everyone.

For the first time since Paige had brought me to the tree in the woods at the bottom of her yard and from there taken me to the 9th century, I felt a flash of anger towards her, although it was immediately replaced with guilt. What right did I have to be angry with her if the possible consequences of my involvement in her second (and completely voluntary) disappearance hadn't even fully occurred to me until Sergeant Halson called?

I went to bed that night in a terrible state, so stressed out I could barely sleep before dawn broke, and then spent the next couple of days like that. Eventually I got so tired I had to sit down one afternoon in the living room of my rented flat and seriously consider what I was going to do.

The first thing I forced myself to accept was that I hadn't done anything wrong or illegal. I hadn't. So the next time I spoke to the police – and I knew there would be a next time – I had to keep that thought in mind, so I didn't come across like a nervous wreck again and give them a reason to suspect me. The second thing I did was make a pact with myself to set aside the knowledge I now had, from my excursion into the deep past. I couldn't live with it sitting out there in the open space of my psyche, it would drive me mad. And I couldn't deny it, no matter how hard I tried to come up with alternate explanations for what had happened that afternoon in September. So what I did was tuck it under the mental rug, out of sight, to be dealt with at some later time. Some time when I didn't have papers due, parties to attend and graduate schools to apply to.

Looking back, I see what a futile gesture it was. But I'm English, for better and for worse. For better, I have a charmingly dry sense of humor and people find me kind and warm. For worse, I can rely much too heavily on the 'sweep it under the carpet' school of emotional wellbeing. And that doesn't work for the kind of secret I had then – huge and terrifyingly real.

For awhile, through midterms and into the second half of the fall semester, it seemed to work. Sure, I was a little more irritable with my friends, a little quicker to frown or snap than I had been before. And I started to experience terrible headaches that would come on in the late afternoons and spread their tentacles of pain up the back of my neck and around my skull until my whole head seemed to be one big, throbbing locus of agony. But there was ibuprofen for the headaches and excuses for my friends.
Within a couple of weeks of Paige's second disappearance, the police knew. And shortly after that, the media knew. And once the media found out, everything went crazy. Grand Northeastern hired security guards to escort myself – and a couple of Paige's other friends who had made the mistake of speaking to the media (and thereby making themselves recognizable to the general public) the first time she vanished – to and from our classes. Our social circle closed tightly around us, too, a protective barrier of an emotional and often a physical kind. I watched more than once as the people who cared about me chased prying reporters away from bars where they had tracked me down. Once, one of my professors almost came to blows with a man from one of those sleazy gossip websites as he surreptitiously tried to snap photos of me through the window in the classroom door. My parents hired a lawyer to act as my representative when dealing with the police department and, eventually, the FBI.

Nobody let me down. I was as lucky as it's possible to be in the middle of an epic shit-storm like that. But it wasn't enough. The stories were impossible to avoid (even as I tried to do so) the headlines blaring out from countless different websites, blogs, newspapers, TV news shows, evening talk shows, conversations outside classrooms that would go awkwardly silent as soon as the participants spotted me.

I lied to my parents, my friends and myself. I told them it was fine, that I was fine. But I wasn't fine. And it began to manifest itself in strange ways. For one, I became obsessed with the time period of the Viking invasions of England. Not obsessed in the sense of reading a book here or there or watching a documentary every couple of weeks. No, I became obsessed to the point of skipping classes to Google various locations, known battles, key figures from that time in British history. I started heading straight to my room as soon as I got home every evening, and skipping college parties with my friends, in order to read further into my new area of interest.

I also started driving to River Forks on a regular basis, down the road the Renner's house was located on and slowing to a crawl as I drove by, irrationally hoping to see a light on inside, or maybe Mr. Renner out in the driveway, spreading salt on the thick layer of ice that formed on every surface during that cold winter.

One time, I even parked my car on the road that bordered the Renner's large property on the other side, away from the eyes of the police that were still to be found lurking outside a few days a week, either sitting quietly in their cars or looking around the yard. It took me half an hour to walk through the snowy, overgrown field to the woods, and then I almost got lost, disoriented from only having been on that part of the property once before. But eventually, I found the tree and then I stood there for a long time – until I could no longer feel the tips of my fingers or my toes frozen in my boots – with a feeling of desperation in my heart.

I missed Paige. I would have missed her anyway, even if I hadn't known exactly where – and when – she was. But her absence was even more acute for knowing she was the only person on earth I could possibly talk to about what I was going through. And she was gone. As thoroughly gone as she would have been had she died, or been kidnapped again by the aliens who then took her and her father and her half-human, half-alien baby back to their home planet (which is exactly what happened, according to certain
The tree was right in front of me. In my feet was that strange, aching pain I sometimes get when standing on high cliffs or ledges, that feeling of being half-convinced your own brain is going to go rogue and convince you to throw yourself off the edge before you even have time to think about it. In my hands was an itch, an urge to reach out and touch one of the tree's roots or even its rough, thick trunk. But I didn't. I couldn't. No more than I could jump off a cliff. For one thing, I couldn't stay there the way Paige had. How would I explain my absence when I got back? I'd seen what Paige herself had gone through. And what about the 9th century itself? It would be insane to go back there, where marauding Vikings and possibly-hostile locals lurked, unbound by modern laws against the kidnapping of strange women.

Still. I wasn't there in the woods because I wanted to escape my modern life. Everything that was happening at the time was a trial, but I wasn't in the same boat Paige had been in as a child, with one parent dead and one unable to care for me, no friends, no social life. I was there because I couldn't believe what had happened. You'd think you would. You'd think literal, physical proof would be enough. And then you go back in time, return to the 21st century, and over the next few weeks the sheer power of knowledge – of knowing that something like that isn't possible – begins to go to work on your battered mind, replacing what your five senses told you was true. I could feel it happening to me, the way I'd already begun to half laugh at myself, internally, when I thought about the way Paige's friend Eadgar had looked. I would picture his dirty, bare feet and his nearly entirely toothless grin and smile a little sheepishly. That can't have happened, a voice would whisper. Your mind is playing tricks on you. You imagined it. Or, if you didn't imagine it, your memory is exaggerating things. You know this, you've read about this – how unreliable memory is. Why would you be an exception?

It was easier to believe the voice. I knew if I kept believing it I might one day be able to tell myself that the whole episode was some kind of hallucination. But even as I began to go along with the cajoling doubts, I couldn't forget what had happened. I couldn't forget that feeling of losing my breath, tumbling through a darkness thicker and more fathomless than any earthly midnight. And then the smell of those woods, of the sea – the smell of home. How could it be that in one moment I was standing on American soil, and the next I was home – in England? It couldn't be.

I took a small, unconscious step towards the tree. Maybe I could just make sure? Maybe if I put the tip of one finger on it I might feel that blackness trying to suck me in again, and pull my hand back before it took me?

Maybe, maybe, maybe. No. I stepped back, turned away, and began the long trudge back over the field to the car. There was a heaviness in my heart matched only by the heaviness of my body – it seemed to take more effort than usual to lift one foot in front of the other. It was the weight of a secret – the kind of secret that needs to be shared at the same time it can't be, because no one would believe it.
In early December, just before classes broke up before exams, I got a call from Michael Rappini, my lawyer. He was under instruction from my parents – who were paying his not insubstantial fees – not to contact me unless it was important. So I knew when I took the call that it wasn't going to be a chat about the weather.

"You need to come into my office sometime over the next week," he said, after we exchanged pleasantries. He sounded casual, but there was something forced about his tone.

"Oh?" I replied, mirroring his faux casualness. "Why's that?"

"Some people want to speak to you. I'll be there with one of my colleagues – I've already spoken to your parents about –"

"Who wants to speak to me?"

Something was up. I could hear it in the way he was choosing his words with extreme care.

"Uh, the FBI. It's routine, Emma. Your friend is missing again – and so is her baby and her father – and they're just doing their due dili –"

"The FBI?!" I exclaimed, hearing my own voice rising sharply. "The FBI? Why does the FBI want to –"

"Emma!" My lawyer cut me off. "Emma, slow down. OK? Listen to me. This is routine. You were her best friend and you told the police you saw her very shortly before she went missing again. You're not a suspect, it's nothing like that. They just –"

"Why do you have to be there, then?" I blurted out, terrified at the prospect of having to lie to an FBI agent – which is definitely what I was going to have to do if they asked me if I knew where Paige was. The local cop was bad enough, but federal law enforcement? No part of me was confident that I'd be able to pull that off.

But Michael Rappini Esq. was good at his job. He had the knowledge and the soothing manner that came from years of dealing with panicky, nervous clients. He talked me through the process, assured me I was not under any suspicion, that the FBI were speaking to everyone Paige knew so I was naturally going to be on that list of people, and reminded me that both himself and a colleague of his were going to be at my side the entire time.

Three days later, and after telling my parents it wasn't necessary for them to fly out
from the UK to be with me, I found myself in Mr. Rappini's office, with him on one side of me, his colleague – a white-haired older man named Murray who would have made a great mall Santa Claus – on the other, and two FBI agents sitting across a table from us. Before I'd gone into the room, I'd been counseled to state that I didn't remember if any questions I didn't understand came up, or any that I didn't feel comfortable answering. I felt a little reassured by that, like I had a little fallback position if the FBI agents started getting too close to the bone.

At first their questions were routine, although I did notice that they seemed very interested in my relationship with Paige. Had we ever been 'intimate'? No. Had we fought before she went missing the second time? No. The first time? No. And they kept coming back to that point about a fight or a conflict, using different word combinations, slightly different tones of voice, to ask what was essentially the same question over and over. I didn't budge, because I was telling the truth.

Eventually, they got around to the actual day Paige had gone missing the second time – the day she took me – and her baby son and her father – back to the 9th century and only one of us returned.

"We'd like to ask you a few questions about Paige's phone records, if that's alright?"

I shifted in my seat nervously because I knew this was probably the part where I was going to have to lie, and nodded my head.

One of the agents – an enormous bald man who completely looked the part – pulled a sheaf of papers out and began to leaf through them.

"Here. She called you the night before, on her cell phone. A short call. Do you remember what you discussed?"

I told the officers Paige was calling to invite me to come over and meet the baby the next day, which was true. They asked me to confirm I had gone to Paige's house the next day and I did. They seemed satisfied – things seemed to be winding down. But just when I thought I was going to be given the go-ahead to leave, the other agent, a woman with a thick, frizzy brown hair and bags under her eyes, pursed her lips and looked at me.

"Paige texted you the next morning – yeah, here it is. 'Remember to wear drab colors – nothing bright! I know it sounds dumb but just trust me.' Can you tell us what that was about?"

What that was about was Paige making sure I wouldn't freak out any of her medieval friends by wearing a pair of bright fuchsia trainers or a kelly-green bobble-hat to meet them. Not that I could tell the FBI that.

"Uh, I don't remember." I said, averting my eyes from the agents' steady gazes.

"You don't remember?"

"No, sorry, I don't."

"Alright. Well I think that's everything for now, Emma. We may have some more questions in the future if you –"

Michael Rappini waved his hand in the air. "Yeah, you know the drill – call me, not her."

I began to stand up, relieved that it was over, and was about to head out of the room when the frizzy-haired agent spoke up again.
"You don't seem very upset."
I turned to face her, my mouth open, about to say something I probably would have regretted, when Michael jumped in.
"Come on," he said, addressing both agents. "You know better than that."
"It's a simple question Mr. Rappini. Her best friend is missing for the second time – and this time with her newborn son and her father – and your client hasn't shown a single sign of grief or worry throughout this whole –"
At that very moment, as I moved to approach the woman, angry at what she was implying (which I only later realized was exactly what she intended) and about to tell her she didn't know what she was talking about, Michael shot me a stern look, shook his head at me and guided me firmly out the door. As soon as it was shut behind us I started to protest but he shut me down.
"No, Emma. Don't do that. That's what they want. They want you to get emotional, to slip up, to say something that could give them a reason to question you further. And it's my job to stop that from happening. So the interview is over and you can go home now, unless you have any questions?"
I stood back, feeling slightly chastised even though my lawyer had a smile on his face. "Questions? Um. I don't know. Is that it? Are they going to need to talk to me again?"
"I'm not sure. Maybe. You haven't been following this, have you? The story, I mean – online, on the news? You haven't been paying attention?"
"No," I replied, because I hadn't been, not for weeks at that point. I wouldn't have been able to function. Of course the headlines were oftentimes impossible to miss, splashed across the top of this homepage or that newspaper lying on a campus bench. I knew Paige's second disappearance had caused a kind of national hysteria that only seemed to intensify as the days passed and wild speculation bloomed and spread like an invasive plant into the nooks and crannies of the collective cultural consciousness. The talking heads on the evening news shows were investigators and officials now, not politicians, and they couldn't offer anything beyond their own baffled statements that they a) had no solid signs of foul play and b) didn't have even the slightest clue as to what had happened to Paige Renner.
When I left Michael Rappini's office that evening, a man jumped out of some bushes in the parking lot and started snapping photos and shouting questions at me.
"Where is Paige Renner?"
"Did you have something to do with Paige Renner's disappearance?"
"Is it true that there are text messages of a fight you were having with Paige over a boy you both liked?"
Michael appeared before I could do anything dumb, sprinting across the asphalt and escorting me the rest of the way to my car using his jacket to block the reporter's view.
That incident was my first real hint that there was a newly direct focus on me in the media-created narrative of What Happened To Paige Renner.
"Do they think I had something to do with this?" I asked, shaken, once I was in my car and the reporter had been shooed away.
Michael shook his head. "Half this country thinks extraterrestrials took your friend,
Emma. I would strongly advise you to keep doing what you're doing and stay away from any media coverage. Grand Northeastern is still paying for personal security, right?"

I nodded and held my hands up in front of me to confirm that they were trembling. They were. "Yes," I confirmed, "they are."

"Good. Go straight home and give your parents a call. Invite some friends over. Make sure you don't spend too much time alone."

I looked up at my lawyer, then, and asked him if he thought I had something to do with Paige's disappearance.

"Of course not!" He laughed, and I almost melted with relief when I could see he was telling the truth. "The police have nothing, Emma. Even if you weren't my client I'm smart enough to see there's no motive, no reason for you to have done anything wrong. I don't know what's going to happen – and by that I mean I don't know if they're going to find your friend – but I really don't think you have much to worry about beyond possibly another couple of conversations with our charming friends at the FBI."

Michael Rappini was a good lawyer. Not just in the technical sense of knowing the law, but in the sense of being very good at getting people to trust him, to open up to him. As he was standing outside my car that evening it was on the tip of my tongue to tell him. It would have been so easy.

"You're right," I could have said. "There is no evidence of any foul play because there wasn't any. They won't find Paige, though. She's gone. Gone where? Oh, the 9th century. She's a time-traveler, you see. Her baby's father is a Viking – she's gone back to be with him, and she took her dad, too. So yeah, that's the explanation. Do you think we should go back into the office and tell the FBI?"

But I didn't say any of that. I just gave my lawyer what must have been a rather pained look, thanked him for his help and his reassurances, and drove off. On the way back, I looped through River Forks again, past the Renner's house (there was only one lonely looking media van parked outside now, and I couldn't see any people at all) and down the road that ran the length of their property. It was as if I could feel the tree in the woods, calling to me. My friend Paige, the only person who could possibly understand what I was going through, felt simultaneously quite nearby and impossibly distant. Had she even thought about what it would be like for me? Had she understood that by inviting me over that afternoon – and taking me back to the past! – that she was setting me up for scrutiny from law enforcement and a rabid media? How could she not have?

I tightened my grip on the steering wheel even as I slowed at the point across the fields from her house where I could see the woods. Was I angry at Paige? I think I was. Part of me understood it wasn't her fault, what was happening to me. And part of me also knew that had she not told me where she was going, I would have spent the rest of my life wondering what happened to my best friend, torturing myself with worst case scenarios. But part of me was just angry she'd escaped and I was still there, dealing with things that weren't mine to deal with.

I pulled off the road and turned the car's engine off before I realized what I was doing. It was almost dark. What was I doing? Was I going to stumble across that snowy field again, with only the light from my phone to guide me, to – what? To go back in time? To
lay my hands on the tree and confirm that I wasn't losing my mind, that it was in fact a portal into the past and I wasn't developing some obscure hallucinatory condition? And then what? Was I going to come back a few minutes later and everything would be fine?

In the dying light of the day I caught a glimpse of myself in the rearview mirror and couldn't help sighing. My hair was an un-brushed mess, piled into a lopsided bun on top of my head, and my eyes were ringed with dark circles from the effort it was taking to pretend everything was fine, just fine, nothing wrong at all.

"Stop being so bloody stupid!" I shouted at myself, out loud, as I turned the car's engine back on and pulled back onto the road, headed back to the shared apartment close to campus where I knew my roommates would be waiting for me with their worried faces and their kindly words that didn't help at all, no matter how much we all wanted them to.
A few nights later, after my parents called to tell me they were hiring a private security company to provide me with 24/7 protection – on top of that provided on-campus by the university, I found myself tumbling down a rabbit hole. Not just a rabbit hole, either, but the rabbit hole. The one I'd been avoiding for weeks – the internet. My mum and dad both refused to articulate why it was, exactly, that I needed even more security and it was that refusal, combined with the genuine worry in their voices when we spoke, that led me to break my personally-imposed moratorium on reading about the Paige Renner case online.

Within minutes and the most cursory of Google searches I had tens of thousands of pages of news results – and even more of non-news results. Crime discussion forums, blogs, Twitter conversations running for days and days, endless YouTube videos uploaded by random citizens – some more interested in objectivity than others – it seemed that most of humanity in the western world had talked of little else for weeks on end. I wouldn't have thought it possible for people to be more obsessed with the mysterious case of Paige Renner than they had been the first time she turned up missing, but they were. If anything, the tone was now even more hysterical. There were whole sites dedicated to occult theories – Paige and her baby had been kidnapped by satanists, her father had sold them both into slavery and then killed himself out of guilt, beings from another dimension had taken them, Paige was a virgin and her son the new messiah. What I'm saying is, there was a lot of truly insane stuff floating around, and it wasn't difficult to find.

The other thing that wasn't difficult to find was the camp (there seemed to be numerous different camps in the 'what happened to Paige Renner' world of online speculation) who seemed certain that I, Emma Wallis, was responsible for everything. The text messages had leaked, people were interpreting the reminder Paige sent me to wear natural colored clothing as some kind of coded cry for help. I had been there when she sent the texts, they said, holding her baby at knifepoint, forcing her to compose messages that would allow me to get away with the crime. Not that any of them bothered to go into how those texts in particular had allowed me to weasel out of my guilt, of course.

The death threats were numerous, detailed and thrown out almost casually by people
who lived across the world from me, people who had never met and would never meet me. Some of the more legitimate news websites had stories about these death threats. I scanned headlines. 'Paige Renner's Best Friend Living In Fear For Her Life.' 'Emma Wallis In Hiding' 'What Did Emma Know?'

I wasn't hiding, though. I wasn't in fear for my life. Not then, anyway. And even after reading some of the truly vile things that had been written about me online, it still didn't quite seem real. Surely nobody could just believe that I had something to do with Paige coming to harm, could they? Without any evidence?

That night, I went to bed bemused more than upset, still disbelieving that anyone except the genuinely delusional could think I did something wrong. I knew how the internet could exaggerate things, make it seem like a few crazies were a real movement in the real world. And I had even more security by then. Things would be fine. I would be fine. I just need to wait for the storm to pass. That's all.

As if laughing at me, the next day the world sent me a message about the accuracy of my naive assumptions. I was leaving the Arts building in campus, buoyed by a conversation with one of my professors about my final paper, with my private security guard a few feet behind me and the guard provided by Grand Northeastern already waiting for me by my car. I noticed the couple walking towards me the way you notice anyone sharing your space – they looked like fellow students and I didn't think anything of them.

But just as they were about to pass me, at the very last minute, one of them turned to me suddenly and spit in my face as the other began filming on their phone. In less than 2 seconds (although it somehow felt a lot longer) my guard had knocked the spitter to the ground, but this hadn't stopped either of them screaming at me, hurling awful accusations in voices that were dripping with hate-filled certainty.

"Murderer!" "Baby murderer!" "Bitch!" "Cunt!" If I'm not mistaken, I'm pretty sure I even caught a "Satan's whore!" thrown in for good measure as I furiously wiped spittle off my face with my gloved hands. And of course, the ruckus attracted attention and very soon there were other people moving in to observe – many of them with their phones out. The other guard arrived and they both set to restraining the two crazies, making sure I was OK and admonishing the people nearby to stop filming. Which, obviously, no one listened to.

I stood where I was, shaking with rage, wanting desperately to lash out at the two people who were pinned on the ground – still spewing expletives and trying to wriggle free of the guards' grips – and filled with a strange kind of loneliness as everyone around just stared at me. No one offered to help – in hindsight, they were probably too shocked themselves, or maybe they thought the guards would not want them to intervene – but I remember their blank eyes as they looked at me. Oh, their faces said. It's her. Paige Renner's friend. The last person to see Paige Renner alive. The one who might even have had something to do with Paige Renner's disappearance. Paige Renner. Paige Renner. Paige Renner.

I sank to my knees and covered my face with my hands until more campus security arrived to disperse the growing crowd.
Almost two hours later, after Michael Rappini and the police had been called and statements taken from myself and several witnesses, I found myself next to my car with the former, who looked deeply concerned, and two security men standing a respectful few feet away.

"Maybe you should go home for Christmas?" Michael said. "Things are just getting crazier and crazier and I don't know how long it's going to be before the public latches on to the next big thing. It could be awhile."

It wasn't that I didn't want to see my parents, or that I didn't want a break from what was becoming near-constant vigilance for media, crazy people, gawkers etc. – it's that I had plans to spend Christmas in America with my friends and roommates. It was our senior year and we knew this would be our last holiday season together before we all scattered to the four winds to start building our post-college lives – and I was damned if I was going to let anyone ruin that for me.

But standing there that night and seeing the look on my lawyer's face made me question myself for the first time, and in spite of the stubborn streak I had inherited from both parents.

"I don't know," I replied slowly, too exhausted to feel much of anything by that point. "Maybe. I'll call them tomorrow."

"Think about it," Michael said, giving me a stiff, professional hug. "And call me if you need anything, or have any questions. But I do think you need a break from all this, Emma. It's not healthy."
I didn't call my parents the next day. I didn't call anyone. I turned my phone off when I woke up and dressed warmly against the early winter chill. Then I drove to the spot where I could see the woods on the Renner's property from the road – on the opposite side of the fields to where the house was located – and parked my car. Half an hour later I was there again, at the tree. Out of breath from trudging through the snow, and so wrapped up I knew there was no danger of inadvertently allowing my skin to come into contact with the tree, I slumped down against one of the roots and searched the stillness of the early afternoon for signs of my lost friend. She'd promised to leave a clay pot here, in 2017, if she needed to see me. But there was no clay pot to be found. No footprints. Not the sound of her shy laugh.

"Why did you leave me to deal with all this?" I asked aloud, as hopelessness pressed in all around me. I missed Paige deeply, but my anger hadn't disappeared. I lay in bed sometimes at night, trying to come up with ways she could have prevented the storm that was now swirling around me. Why hadn't she left a note, saying she was leaving with her dad and her baby, going to Belize or Brazil or somewhere where she knew they wouldn't be found, but that she was OK and Eirik was OK and her dad was OK and no one was to worry or try to find them?

Knowing that wouldn't have worked, that if anything it just would have stoked the flames of the great mystery higher, didn't stop me from imagining it. Paige could have done more. She could have left some sign, some hint, that I wasn't involved in any of it. I couldn't get past that thought, and I couldn't get past my growing resentment over it, even as I knew that what was happening wasn't anyone's fault, not really.

Mostly, I just wanted someone to talk to. I pulled one of my gloves off as I thought about how close she might be, the one person on earth – and at any point in time – who would understand what was happening to me. She could have been less than five feet away, depending on how you looked at it. My bare hand hovered over the ridged bark of the tree and I snatched it back at a sudden disorienting wave of dizziness when it dipped just a little closer.

Had I imagined it? I didn't know.

You can come straight back. Maybe she's there right now? Maybe she wants to talk to you, too? She said she wouldn't be near the tree but how could she know where she
would be months later?

Suddenly, and without allowing myself to think about it for one more second, I flattened my palm against one of the tree's roots, gasping in a last gulp of air and instantly regretting my impulsiveness as that strange darkness swallowed me again, just as it had months ago when Paige first brought me to the past.

And then, just as suddenly, I was once again lying on the ground in a wood. I peered up through the bare branches of the trees to a sky that was no longer a bright, wintery blue but instead heavy and grey. Familiar. Real.

I got to my feet a few moments later and tried to orient myself. It looked different, without any of the lush summer greenery, but the path was the same as it had been before. I took a first few tentative steps down the narrow path, towards the sea. And as I walked, the quiet struck me once again. Back in the forest on the Renner property, as peaceful as it had seemed to be there, there was still the sound of traffic in the background, the distant roar of a plane's engines as it cut its way across the cold blue sky, the hum of machinery – a snow-blower, maybe? – from the next property.

In the place where I was at that moment, there was only a billowing quietness, so all-encompassing that it amplified every tiny sound – the snap of a twig, the slight, icy crunch of a bird landing on the frosty ground before spotting me and taking off again. And then, a few minutes later and as I was too distracted to be paying nearly enough attention to my surroundings, the sound of the sea. My pace quickened without my even noticing it and then I was there, at the top of the small bay with the slate-colored sea laid out in front of me. An odd little moment of homecoming passed through my heart, then, a wobble of recognition that stung my eyes and made me clasp my hands together. For this was no foreign place, this was no exotic destination. This was the North Sea, along whose beaches I had walked as a child with my parents and my grandparents and our dog on many a Sunday morning outing.

There were no ships in the North Sea that day, no great vessels stacked with shipping containers of plastic toys and cars and blue jeans from factories in the far east. There was nothing – only whitecaps and a biting wind I couldn't help but lean into, so familiar did it feel.

I walked through the grasses at the top of the beach and then down onto the beach itself, losing my footing slightly on a patch of slippery seaweed at the high tide line and laughing at myself.

I won't stay long, I told myself as the wind carried my laughter away. Just a little while. Maybe Paige is here? Maybe she'll come to the beach with her father or her husband and see me? Maybe I can tell her everything that's happened?

I bent down at one point, fascinated to see a little white clamshell of the kind I used to collect as a child and store in a glass jar that sat on our doorstep, and eagerly stowing it away in my pocket. Soon I came upon a pebble of about the right shape and carried it further down the beach, almost to the water's edge, so I could attempt to skip it over the surface like my father had taught me. It didn't work, the waves were too rough, but I tried again and again with different pebbles, entirely unconscious of the fact that I was trying to occupy myself as the minutes ticked by, hoping against hope that Paige would
just emerge from the trees and give me the big I-understand-what-you're-going-through hug that I needed.

Paige didn't emerge from the woods as I chucked beach rocks into the sea, though. Someone did – two someones, in fact – but neither one of them was my friend. I heard them before I saw them, because I was still facing the sea, and a frisson of fear and hope ran through my body. What if it was her? What if it wasn't her?

I almost cried when I turned around to see two men, neither of whom I recognized from my previous visit. They looked similar to the two I'd met before, though – small and dirty and disheveled. Even in the cold they were still in tunics, although they were long-sleeved now, and looked to be made of something heavier – wool, maybe? They each held what appeared to be crude spears – and they were both staring at me. It only took a second or two to remember what Paige had said to me only a few months previously – wear something drab, Emma. No bright clothing.

And there I was standing in front of two men from the 9th century in a bright green parka and a matching hot pink scarf and gloves set. Good thinking, Em. Always planning ahead, aren't you?

The three of us stayed where we were, examining each other for a few more moments. I didn't perceive any threat from the men – if anything they looked more worried about me than I was about them. Finally, when I couldn't stand the anticipation anymore, I spoke first.

"Do you know Paige Renner?" I yelled, because they were far enough away to necessitate yelling. "Paige? She has a son named Eirik - her husband is a Viking?"

The men looked at me, and then at each other, and then back at me. Finally, one of them took a few steps towards me – although he reversed course pretty quickly when I did the same.

"Stay back!"

I stopped moving, figuring that if two men with spears – small men, yes, and rather flimsy-looking spears but spears all the same – wanted me to stay back, then I would stay back.

"What do you say?" The other man shouted eventually, when they seemed reassured that I wasn't about to charge them like a bull in my green parka and my pink accessories. It was an unfamiliar accent, so rough I could barely understand the words. But I thought he'd asked me to repeat myself.

"Paige!" I shouted back. "Paige Renner! She has a baby boy and her husband is a Viking! I'm her friend!"

The men conferred with each other and I caught the word 'Viking' being repeated. At that point I couldn't stay where I was any longer – if these two knew where Paige was, I wanted to know, too, and I wanted to know right away. I began to walk towards them again, holding my hands up in the air when they noticed me and both crouched down into defensive positions.

"I'm not going to do anything," I laughed, not taking the situation anything like as seriously as I should have been. "I don't have a spear – I don't have anything! I'm just looking for my friend Paige. Her husband – at least I think he's probably her husband – is
a Viking. Do you know her?"

The taller of the men, who probably stood a good 3 or 4 inches shorter than me, straightened up a little. "What is this 'Viking' you say?" He asked, eying me suspiciously. "Where are you from? The estate?"

The estate? Where the hell was the 'estate'? "The what?" I asked impatiently. I didn't want to talk about where I was from. I wanted to find Paige. "I'm, uh — I'm not from here. But I'm looking for Paige. Paige Renner. Do you know her?"

"Paige is running?" The shorter man asked, obviously deeply confused. "Who is Paige?"

"No!" I barked, before taking a slow breath and calming myself down — yelling at people wasn't going to help. Not in 2017, not in 817 — or whenever it was. "I mean, I'm sorry, Paige is my friend. I am trying to find her. It's very important that I find her. Do you know where she is?"

By this point, both of the peasant men — for that is obviously what they were, with their tattered clothes and their jumpy, deer-like watchfulness — seemed to be entranced by me. Or, to be more accurate, my clothing. Their eyes explored the shiny, smooth fabric of my parka and their fingers twitched fearfully as they reached out to touch the glove covering outstretched fingers.

"Paige," I repeated as they examined me. "Paige Renner. Please. I need to find her."

"Her teeth!" Exclaimed one of the men to his companion when I smiled to show how friendly I was. And then they were both leaning in, shaking their heads like they couldn't believe what they were seeing.

"We don't know Paige," one of them said as they craned their heads, trying to get another glimpse into my mouth. "And we shan't be talking to you any longer. You're a higher, from the estate. Why do you speak to us?"

"Because I'm looking for my —" I began, when all three of us became simultaneously aware of the sudden sound of a horse's hooves on frozen ground. So quickly was the animal approaching that it was there by the time we managed to lift our heads. And on the back of the beast was a pale man with a heavy, dark cape around his shoulders. He took one look at my two conversational companions and lifted his hand, which I saw held a whip, and bringing it cracking down without ceremony on one of their backs.

"NO!" I screamed, leaping forward and snatching at the whip, at which point all three of them turned and stared at me like I'd just sprouted a few extra arms and begun speaking in tongues.

"Don't!" I continued, put on the spot by three pairs of staring eyes. "Why are you hitting them? I was just asking —"

"AWAY!" The man on the horse bellowed at the cowering peasants, ignoring me completely. "Away, dogs, or I'll whip your backs bloody!"

I don't know what I was expecting. Some kind of fight-back, maybe. An under-the-breath protest. Something. But there was none of that. The two shabbily dressed men bent at their waists and averted their eyes from the other man's gaze as they cowered and groveled their way back into the woods.

When they had disappeared, the imperious man on the horse turned back to me. I
was very conscious of the fact that he still held the whip in a position to strike at any moment. His eyes were dark and set deep in a face that seemed to be constructed entirely of a series of sharp, cruel angles.

"What are you doing out here, lady?" He asked as his eyes scanned me from top to toe. There was no friendliness to his tone, only a civility that hadn't been there when he addressed the peasants. On some level, and for some reason, this man thought I was someone to speak to, rather than strike. "Where have you come from with such colorful dressings? Come closer, let me see you."

The last thing I wanted to do was approach him, but he had a whip and not moments ago he'd proved himself entirely capable of using it. I stepped forwards, ducking away from the horse's head as the animal sniffed at me, mirroring his rider's haughtiness.

At once, the man dismounted and I couldn't stop myself from lurching back, away from him. I was afraid. In 2017, you would not have caught me shrinking from any man—not in broad daylight, anyway. But I was no longer in 2017 and something about the caped man's manner told me he felt it was his right to inspect me. I held my breath as he came closer, so close I could feel his hot, stinking breath on my face. I pressed my lips together, sensing it would not be wise to show disgust.

"You're not from the estate, are you?" He said a few minutes later, a statement as much as it was a question.

What was this estate people kept talking about? I had no idea. But when I replied no, confirming I was not from there, my interlocutor's face suddenly grew hard.

"A Northwoman, then, is that it? I've heard the Northmen sometimes use their women for tasks to which women are not suited—some even say for battle. Or for scouting. Is that what you are, lady? Are you a scout?"

"A – a what?" I stammered, attempting to step away and then gasping as the man suddenly grasped the scarf around my neck and yanked me towards him. "A North – scout? I'm not – I don't know what you're talking about – I –"

But he jerked the ends of the scarf again and they tightened around my throat enough to almost cut off my breath. A flutter of panic surged up inside me and I snatched at the scarf, trying to loosen it. No sooner had my fingers found their way under the fabric than I suddenly found myself on my knees, and one hand sinking into the cold, rough sand beneath. How had I –?

"Oooh..."

That was me making that strange sound. And as I made it a sharp sting on my left cheek brought with it the realization that I'd just been knocked off my feet. I looked up just in time to see a second blow coming my way and only barely managed to duck it. And even then, as it dawned on me that I was going to have to fight back, a small voice in the back of my mind berated me. How stupid are you, Emma? What did you think, that this was going to be some kind of theme park? That you were going to be safe? You idiot. You complete idiot!

The dark-eyed man was not much—if any—bigger than me, and we were too close for him to wield the whip effectively. Also, I got the sense that he was surprised—that he didn't expect the level of fight-back he was getting. We were fighting over my scarf, he
attempting to drag me towards the top of the beach, ignoring my breathless gasps, and me clawing at his hands and, eventually, sinking my teeth into one of them, when he made the mistake of letting it wander too close to my mouth. He screamed, enraged, and jumped away from me, tightening his other hand around the wound.

"Baint!" He shouted – or at least, that's what it sounded like. It was my first time hearing the word, but I had a pretty good idea that it wasn't a term of endearment. "Aye, a Northwoman through and through! As rough as a wild dog!"

I didn't – and couldn't – know what the man intended to do with me, if he managed to subdue me. I'm not a violent person. But how could I take the chance? How could I assume he would somehow be open to a conversation after what had just happened? I couldn't. When he paused his diatribe to look briefly down at his wounded hand, I took aim and kicked him, hard and true and square – right in the balls. He went down at once, silently. The last thing I heard before disappearing back into the woods on my way to the tree was a high-pitched moan.

Without slowing to check if I was being pursued I tore one of my gloves off and threw myself down at the base of the tree, pressing my hand against its bark and welcoming the darkness as it drew me back to the future like a wave dragging an unskilled swimmer out to sea.

And then I was there, in the woods on the Renner's property, yanking off my scarf as my breath came in quick, harsh wheezes and furious at myself for being so stupid.

"What were you thinking?!" I screeched at myself, out loud, when I'd recovered enough to begin stomping my way back to the car. It would have been a humorous scene, to anyone looking on. A young women with her hair sticking up in all directions, yelling at herself and kicking at the snowdrifts in anger. But there was nothing funny about what had just happened – about what could have just happened, if I'd missed with that kick, or if the man had seen it coming and blocked it somehow.

I'm not that person. I'm not that girl. I've never been a risk taker. I can't even fly without dozing myself with anti-anxiety meds! So what the hell was I doing going back to a time when there was no such thing as police or the assumption of personal safety?

It's not that I didn't know the answer. I did know. I just didn't like it. I didn't like that something had drawn me back there, something more than my need to see my friend again (although that was definitely part of it), something barely conscious that I sensed I didn't quite have control of.

I jammed my hands into my pockets as I approached the car, meaning to check the time. It was then, at the moment my right hand grasped nothing but an empty gum wrapper, that I realized with a rush of fresh anger that my phone was missing. I checked my other pocket. Nothing. I ripped my coat off and threw it on the car hood, pressing my hands against the pockets on my jeans, front and back. Nothing. Fuck. Fuck!

It was getting dark by then, too, and without the phone to light the way I wasn't going to be able to see a thing back in the woods. I'd have to come back the next day, when it was light.
Back at the apartment I found my new roommate – Colette, who had moved in to replace Paige – sitting alone at the kitchen table.

"Hey Em –" she started, and then stopped instantly when she saw me. Her eye got very big and she looked me up and down. "Oh my God," she continued. "Are you OK? You look, uh –"

"I'm fine. I just need to have a shower and a nap. I went for a walk in the woods and, um, I got a little lost. No big –"

"Is that what happened? Well you better call your parents and your security guy, because both of them have called here asking why you've got your phone turned off. I told them you said you needed some time alone but I think –"

"Yeah," I cut Colette off, because the last thing I felt like doing was chit-chatting. "I lost my phone. I'll call them now."

Before calling anyone, though, I locked myself in the bathroom and undressed, catching my own eye in the mirror and barely able to maintain eye contact with myself.

What were you doing this afternoon? What was all that about?

In the shower, I stood under the hot water for almost half an hour, letting the heat and the pressure pummel my shoulders and the back of my neck. My knees still felt a little wobbly, too. I remembered that feeling from a trip to the seaside as a child with grandparents. They'd both fallen asleep in the sunshine and I'd wandered off, eventually climbing up a very steep bluff and only realizing I'd gone too far – and without planning a route back down – when I'd looked down and noticed how small and faraway the people on the beach looked. That feeling of crystal-clear realization that if I put a foot wrong there was a good chance I would die stayed with me for the rest of my life – a lesson learned. That's what I felt standing there in the shower, that jittery sensation from childhood of understanding just how close I'd just come to something very, very bad.

After wrapping a towel around my wet hair and emerging from the bathroom in a cloud of steam, I flopped onto my bed and used the landline to call my sister back in Norwich. Katie is two years older than me, the rebel to my good girl, and after an adolescence of at times quite vicious sibling rivalry we seemed to have settled into a more adult pattern of sisterly friendship. She knew me probably better than anyone on earth.
"Em?" She asked when she picked up. "Is that you? Where are you calling –"

"I lost my phone, I'm on the landline in my flat. I –" I broke off, unable to finish my sentence as everything that had happened over the past couple of days – and weeks, and months – suddenly seemed to come crashing down onto my head at that very moment.

Katie knew something was wrong. She also knew how much I hated getting emotional in front of other people – even my own sister – so she spoke up to spare me the humiliation. "I know, Em. I saw what happened online. How awful – mum and dad are furious with the security company –"

"What?" I asked, before realizing she was talking about the incident on campus – the one that was apparently, as I suspected it would be, splashed across the internet. "Oh, yeah. Yeah, that was no fun."

"That was no fun?" Katie repeated back me, surprised. "No fun, Emma? It looked fucking awful is what it looked like. All of those people standing about, not doing anything to help you. It made me so feel so helpless to see you like that. You're coming home for Christmas, right? Even if you can't make it by the 25th you could still come for New Year's Eve, couldn't you? Mum and Dad are so desperate to see you, Em. They're so worried. We're all so worried."

But I didn't want to talk about the campus assault or my Christmas plans. I thought I did – I thought that's why I called Katie in the first place – for a little taste of family and normality. It turned out what I really wanted to talk to her about was the fact that I was pretty sure I'd narrowly avoided being kidnapped by a – who had he been, exactly? Not a peasant, not on that fine horse and wearing that heavy cape, the sound of which flapping in the wind I could almost still hear. And not a Viking – nothing about him said 'Viking.' So who had he been? Some kind of higher-up? He'd mentioned an estate – is that where he –

"Emma!"

"Huh? What?" I asked, only then realizing that my sister had been talking the whole time.

"Are you even listening?" Katie scolded me affectionately. "I asked you where you lost your phone, you bloody scatterbrain."

"Well if I knew where I lost it, it wouldn't be lost," I joked, repeating something my mother used to say to us when we were kids because I couldn't actually tell my sister – as much as I wanted to – that I thought I'd lost my phone in the dark ages.

"You sound funny," she said a few minutes later, after we'd been talking about the new paint colors my mother was using in her most recent kitchen redecoration.

"Uh, do I?" I asked, perfectly aware that I did.

"Yeah. Are you OK, Em? I know you're not OK but it's something else. You sound like you're being evasive. Is something going on? Something you're not telling me about?"

I sighed heavily and rubbed my forehead and Katie jumped on it.

"Something is going on, isn't it? Why won't you tell me? I won't tell mum and dad – you know that, right?"

"I know. I just – Katie, I can't tell you. Maybe in the future, when things have settled down. But not right now. It's all too... strange."
I knew, just as I had reacted to Paige's evasions, that my sister would react the same way to mine. And she did, cajoling, promising she wouldn't tell anyone, all of the things I'd said to my friend before going right ahead and assuming she was mad when she told me the truth.

"I can't, Katie. I want to, but I can't."

"What does that mean? You want to but you can't? Why can't you? Has someone sworn you to secrecy?"

I laughed, but it wasn't a happy laugh. "I don't know what to say. I just can't tell you."

"OK," Katie didn't let up. "Then tell me why, at least. Why can't you tell me?"

"Because you'll think I'm bonkers, that's why. Seriously, Katie, it won't be good. Just stop pestering me about it will you? It's starting to fucking annoy me."

I didn't want to snap at my sister, and I regretted it immediately. But what else could I do? She wasn't going to stop. Desperate to make it up to her, I made a snap decision then and there to take the earliest possible flight back to the UK for the Christmas holiday. Social time during my senior year could wait until spring break. I'd pack a bag when I woke up, go find my phone on the Renner's property – and think about what to do if it wasn't there – and then head straight to the airport. It would be good for me to get away, Katie was right about that, and for more reasons than she knew.

Chastised by my harsh words, my sister cheered up right away when I said I would come home. When we hung up I actually felt a little hopeful, like maybe a simple change of location would be enough to take my mind off – well, off everything.
My phone wasn't in the field beside the road, the one I crossed to get to the woods. It wasn't in the woods either. I stood there beside the tree for a good ten minutes, pondering what to do. No one in the past would know what to do with it if they found it (and the battery would be dead soon enough if it wasn't already), but that phone had – well, it kind of had my life on it. All the messages I'd exchanged with friends and family for the past two years, the passwords to my e-mail and various social media and online accounts, photos I'd stupidly never saved anywhere else. I needed it.

"Screw this," I said out loud, determined not to waste any more time than necessary. I needed the phone, so I had to get it. That meant being prepared, not like last time. I hurried back across the field to the car and drove to the little sporting goods store in River Falls where I purchased two cans of extra-strength pepper spray and a mallet from a clerk who didn't quite manage to conceal his curiosity at the English girl seemingly preparing to do battle with either a horde of angry bears or a particularly unpleasant ex-boyfriend.

I left the mallet in the car, of course, when I got back to the field – because what the hell was I going to do with a mallet? Especially with a can of pepper spray in each hand? And then I made my way to the tree, pulled off one of my gloves and lay my hand on its trunk, not even taking five seconds to get over the strange floating feeling when I arrived in Caistley – which I had started to refer to it as in my mind, simply because that's the name Paige had used. What I did do was listen, for a few minutes, for the sound of movement or conversation or any signs of other human beings being in the vicinity. Nothing – only the sound of the wind in the trees and the sea in the distance.

In the weak winter sunshine I crept along the path, a lot more vigilant than I had been the previous day, nervously peeling my eyes away from the ground every few seconds to look around. There was no sign of my phone in the woods, so I kept myself low – I had not chosen to wear my brightly colored parka that time around – and made my way into the collection of driftwood and clumps of dried, frosty seaweed at the top of the beach.

Just as I was beginning to feel deflation setting in I spotted something shiny out of the corner of my eye and there it was – my phone, lying not two feet from my right foot. I picked it up and brushed it off, flooded with relief to see that it appeared dry and
undamaged, and headed right back into the woods to go back to River Forks, and then to the airport. It didn't quite escape me that I was going to be flying right back to the land I was now in – England, and that this fact was deeply, incomprehensibly weird – but I was still nervous about running into the man on horseback and the priority was to get to the tree and safely home again before I allowed myself to begin pondering any of the mysteries of this new world I now found myself in.

I stuffed my phone in my pocket and began to jog down the path, one hand clasped tightly around a canister of pepper spray.

And sure enough, because apparently nothing can ever just go smoothly for me, I heard voices just as I was about to round the last bend in the trail before arriving at my portal back to 2017. Without a second's hesitation I simply threw myself into the undergrowth and crouched down, forcing myself to breathe slowly and calmly after making sure I was obscured from view. Less than 10 seconds later the sound of hooves on frozen ground seemed to fill my ears, so close was the creature.

It wasn't just two men on horseback, though. No. My life isn't that easy. The men had a dog with them, a fact I only realized when its wet, black snout appeared right in front of my face and I bit back a yelp of surprise.

The dog, just as shocked as I was by the sudden appearance of a human he had not been expecting, made no such effort. He barked, loudly and once, and I squeezed my eyes tightly shut, realizing there was nothing to do in the moment but pray the men continued on.

It was not to be.

"Aye!" I heard one of them shout, presumably to his companion who was a little ahead of him. "Dog's got a sniff of something!"

I listened to the sound of feet hitting the ground as the man dismounted, and, in my left pocket, curled my fingers around the second canister of pepper spray as footsteps approached and someone parted the bushes above my head. I looked up, blinking, as the sound of my own heartbeat hammering in my ears almost drowned everything else out, and saw the face of a man less than a foot away.

"It's a woman!" He blurted, looking almost as his surprised as his dog. If I hadn't been so terrified I think I might have laughed.

Soon enough, his companion had joined us and they both loomed over me, looking down at the spot where I was crouched as if they were waiting for me to say something.

"Aye," said one, when I couldn't possibly think of what I might say to make them get on their way without bothering me any further. "This is where Baldric said he ran into a strange wench yesterday, is it not? Stronger than she looked and in strange dressings – is it her, do you think?"

The men addressed each other as if I wasn't right there in front of them, listening.

Finally, I found my voice. Well, a little.

"I'm just," I rasped, before coughing. "I'm picking, uh, berries. I'm looking for berries."

Both men, who I noticed were without the fine capes of the man from the day before – Baldric, I presumed – nonetheless looked better dressed than the two peasants had, and carried themselves with a perceptible air of authority.
"Berries?" One asked, shaking his head. "It's a better tale than that you'll need to conjure up, girl. It's midwinter and the only berries in these woods will kill you dead if you're fool enough to eat them."

Well, there was that story blown. I nodded, eager to show I wasn't hostile, that I agreed with them about my own foolishness and was not interested in causing them any trouble.

The second man leaned in, then, and took a length of my hair in one gloved hand. "It's her," he said slowly, eying me up and down. "Baldric said she had the finest skin he'd ever seen, smoother than the King's daughters, and hair as thick as a southerner's. Look at her – I've never seen a girl like this in my life. Have you?"

Damnit. I clutched the two cans of pepper spray even tighter, keeping each one out of sight, as the men discussed me.

"Was it you that took on Baldric yesterday?" I was asked, in tones that suggested my questioner might hold a certain degree of admiration for a woman willing to take on such a task. "On the beach – was it you? Are you with the Northmen?"

At that moment, the second and larger of the men reached down to where I was crouched beneath them and grasped my upper arm, intending to haul me to my feet. A tingle of adrenaline coursed through my veins as I suddenly stood before them and they both, at the same time, noticed the shiny metal canisters in each of my hands.

"What that -? What have you got there–"

The men were unable to finish questioning me because I decided, at that moment, to take my chance. Noticing that what wind there was, was low and not blowing against my face, I raised both arms and took a kind of general aim in their direction. And then I pressed down on the dispensers and scrunched my own eyes closed, holding my breath, as two thick, red plumes of liquid capsaicin hit my questioners full in the face. In less than two seconds both were shrieking and cursing, spitting and wiping their hands over their faces as I tried to make my way around them and back to the path. Their hands reached out for me – blindly, because they couldn't open their eyes – and I shoved them away, nearly falling on my face when I got a whiff of the pepper spray and began hacking and coughing along with them.

"Don't let her go!" The larger man shouted, waving his arms around and blundering into the undergrowth in an attempt, I guessed, at pursuit. "Baldric wanted her – don't let her flee!"

But there was nothing the men could do as they flailed and hacked and fell over their own feet trying to diminish their agony. If I hadn't been in such a hurry to get out of there, I might have felt bad for them – maybe they hadn't intended me any harm? But I was in a rush, and they clearly knew the man from the beach the previous day, so if I needed to feel guilty about pepper spraying anyone, it would have to wait until later.

So close to the tree I could almost taste the relief I would feel to be back in 2017, with the familiar sound of traffic in my ears, I suddenly realized I was no longer on my feet.

Wait. I was no longer on my –?

No. "Nooooo!" I screamed the word into the winter afternoon as my feet scrabbled
against nothing but air and I grasped the fact that I'd been caught. It didn't seem possible – how had they caught me? I thrashed around, trying to get a look at my captor, but whoever it was had too strong a grip on the back of my jacket. I tried to aim the one can of pepper spray I was still holding behind me but found it knocked out my hand before I could even begin to aim.

"Let me go!" I shouted, slamming an elbow back and finding nothing there to make contact with. "Let me – fucking let me – LET ME GO!"

And then I was being dragged backwards, back towards the path and away from the tree, and my heels were leaving deep, useless grooves in the ground as I tried to slow the progress of whoever it was who had such a grip on me.

A few moments later I was finally allowed to twist around and get a look at him. Baldric. The man with the deep, dark eyes and the cape. The man I had kicked so badly he'd gone mute with agony the day before. And he'd dragged me right back to the spot where the two men I'd just pepper sprayed were still stumbling around and clawing at their own faces, as if trying to physically drag the noxious fumes from their lungs.

Shit.

"I'll say this for you, girl," Baldric said, shoving me. "You know how to seize your moment."

Before I could respond – before I could even think – he drew one of his gloved hands back and hit me, hard, across the left cheek. I stumbled backwards, shocked and afraid, but I didn't fall. He was ready for me this time, though. When I tried to shove him back he stepped neatly aside and delivered a second blow, hard enough to make my head spin briefly.

I'd never been in a fight before, but some instinctive voice piped up just after the second punch, warning me that if I was hit that hard again I was going to lose consciousness.

"OK!" I cried, cowering down and lifting my hands to try to shield my face. "OK! I'll – I won't run! I won't –"

"You're damned right you won't run," Baldric snarled, leaning into the vicious kick he aimed right at my midsection.

I groaned as I fell over onto my side, clutching my stomach as tears leaked out of the corners of my eyes. I was in trouble. I might be about to die. And there was nothing I could do. I curled up into a tight ball and the blows rained down on me. I tried – and usually failed – to refrain from shrieking in pain when each one landed. It stopped only when Baldric tired himself out – 2 minutes later? 5? 10? I didn't know. All I knew was he was so out of breath he doubled over – it would have been a perfect time to run back to the tree, but I found I couldn't really move.

"You're lucky I haven't killed you," he said, as the other two men regained the ability to open their red, swollen eyes and gaze upon the person who had caused them such pain. "The only reason I haven't is that my Lord asked to see you, if we came upon you again."

"Baint!" One of the pepper-sprayed men gasped, before descending into another harsh coughing fit. "A Northwoman to be sure, Baldric, as wild as the wolves! Bring her
here, so I can –"

With thick, absolute horror, I saw that the man was loosening his garments. He reached for me briefly, grabbing at one of my breasts before I twisted my body away. It was Baldric who stepped between us, holding a hand up to his eager companion and shaking his head.

"We must bring her to our Lord, first. Once he sees she's a Northwoman, he'll order her killed – we can surely spend some time with her before the sentence is carried out."

With an angry grunt, the man stopped wrestling with his garments and I found my arms yanked behind my back so Baldric could tie my wrists together with rope so rough I couldn't even struggle, for fear of tearing the skin.

I didn't cry as the men shoved me along the path, out into a more open area with what looked like a few little huts or storage sheds, and not when we entered another wood and my arms began to tingle and go numb from the shoulders down. I didn't feel like crying. The main emotion was anger – it was my fault I was in this mess – and for the second time in two days! And it was on me to get out of it. I had to keep my eyes and ears open, look for chances. Surely the fact that I had over a millennium's worth of civilization on these men – and on the Lord they were taking me to – would give me some advantage, some key to escape?

There was also the fact – dangerously unacknowledged by me – that I still didn't quite believe what was happening. Even the conversation in which Baldric had plainly stated the Lord was going to have me killed hadn't sunk in fully. Paige Renner had been visiting the past since she was a small child. I was only on my third of what had so far been very short trips. Part of me still half-expected Baldric to turn around at any moment and break into a smile before pulling out his iPhone to snap a photo of my surprised face.

"Ha ha, Emma! We got you good! Sorry I hit you so hard!"

Part of me was certain that the grubby little children we passed playing near the huts were smeared with make-up, not dirt, and that their ragged clothing had been specially sewn by some costume designer who was in on the whole thing. None of these thoughts were particularly conscious on my part – I'd been hit repeatedly only a few moments before and wasn't exactly thinking straight – and all the signs seemed to indicate that this experience was real, that I had every reason to be deeply afraid. But still, some part of my mind clung to the irrational hope that at any moment the truth – that this was, somehow, all some big joke being played on me in particular – would be revealed.

Why me, though? Who would go to the lengths it must have taken to recreate not just the past but time-travel itself? And why me? Why would I be the target of such a complex and difficult practical joke? I shied away from those questions, because there were no good answers to any of them.

Soon, Baldric and the two men slowed in front of what looked like a crude kind of fence in which each post, pressed tight against the next, was a single tree trunk, the tops of which had been fashioned into points. It was twice as high as me so there so no peering over it, but from inside I could hear the sounds of people and animals. I could smell them, too. I turned my head to the side, suddenly, as a wave of nausea rose over me, and gagged. The sound of my gagging caused all three men to turn and stare at me.
"If the stench of the estate bothers you," Baldric chuckled, "I can only imagine the kind of spotless palaces the Northmen dwell in."

"Palaces!" One of his companions piped up, and I noticed he was still rubbing at his eyes. "The Northmen sleep on their ships, stealing what they need from the decent East Angles – from the King himself! We'll see what they think when they see the body of their woman hanging from the ramparts!"

It took me a few moments, as Baldric shoved me through a kind of wooden gate, guarded on both sides by four men holding spears, to realize they were talking about me – I was the 'Northwoman' whose body they spoke of 'hanging from the ramparts.'

I jerked back from Baldric, panicky again at the sensation of being now inside an enclosed area – the odd wooden fence now surrounded us on all sides, and livestock – pigs like the one I had seen on my very first visit to the past with Paige, when it had all seemed so... unserious, a few chickens and some very large beasts that looked like cows of some sort. Children, too, who stopped what they were doing – and a good number of them seemed to be working – to stare at the woman with her wrists tied securely behind her back.

"Who is it, Baldric?" One particularly bold little one asked, pointing right at me. "Where've you found her? What's she done wrong?"

"A Northwoman," Baldric responded. "We found her down by the sea, where she tried to kill me not a full day ago – and today tried again to kill the Lord's men with poison. We're taking her to the Lord, to decide what shall be done. Run and tell the others there'll be a hanging tonight!"

Well that makes it sound like the decision's already been made, I wanted to say but didn't.

There was a large building or dwelling within the protective barriers of the sturdy wooden palisades. Unlike any of the other structures I'd seen in the past, this one had two floors. It was made of wood, and the roof of thatched straw. Was it the Lord's house? Other than its size, it was scarcely less crude than the peasant huts we'd passed on our way. At the doorway stood a very large man with a nose so misshapen I could only guess at how many times it had been broken. Propped against one of his massive thighs was a sword, its hilt wrapped with braided leather and its pommel inlaid with what looked like small colored rocks. It was the first sword I saw with my own eyes – in the future or in the past – and just the sight of it caused a shiver of fear to run down my back.

"Baldric," the large man said, nodding in greeting at the leader of my captors.

"Esa," Baldric responded, nodding back in a way that gave me the impression that whatever the hierarchy was in that place, Esa was above Baldric. "We've found the Northwoman who attacked me yesterday – the very same went for these two with some kind of poison. The Lord wished to see her before naming her punishment."

Esa looked down at me, then, because he was of a height to be looking down on everyone – almost including the horse that Baldric still led by its reins. "This is her?" He asked, reaching out quickly and taking my lower jaw in one of his meaty, slab-like hands and turning my face this way and that. "The Northwoman? Are you sure? She looks like a higher to me – look at her skin and –" here he poked one foul-tasting finger into my
mouth, before I managed to spit it out and turn away – "her teeth! I've never seen such magnificent teeth."

"Aye, her teeth are white," Baldric replied, and there was a little hint of impatience in his voice, "and straight, and there are many of them. But the Lord needs to see her no matter how many teeth she has in her head, Esa, and I wonder – is he inside?"

Esa, taking note of Baldric's tone, just shrugged his shoulders. "He's ridden out today."

"And when will he return?"

Instead of answering, Esa returned to his post and took up staring out past Baldric, his men, his horse and myself, giving every sign of being finished speaking.

Baldric sighed heavily and pulled me away, leading me to a stout wooden post which stuck up out of the ground a few feet from the main entrance to the estate's inner enclosure. He pushed me down to the ground and got to work untying the bindings around my wrists – and then retying them after bringing them together behind the wooden post.

"You heard Esa, we've no thought as to the time of the Lord's return. Until then you can stay here on the washing post."

And with that, Baldric left me where I was, and the children too small to be working began to approach warily, whispering and giggling to each other as they stared at me. "My name is Emma," I told the 6 or so of them, causing all of them to flee at once, with a great chorus of shrieks.

"Well that didn't work," I muttered to myself, testing the ropes around my wrists and, upon finding them even tighter than they'd been on the journey back to the estate – turning my head up to try to gauge the sun's position in the sky. It was already below the tops of the trees that surrounded the estate, the light of the day already dimming. That, combined with the lack of activity and the fact that I'd lost my jacket – and gloves – in the struggle with Baldric's men, brought the cold swiftly on. Before long my teeth were chattering loudly.

As the light dwindled further, I got colder. At one point, one of the small children appeared with a length of filthy rag clutched in her little hand, moving skittishly towards me as if intending to lay it over my frozen legs. She leapt back, though, with a high-pitched screech, when I tried to speak to her and all that came out of my mouth was a low grunt. My lips were slow with the chill by then, unable to form proper words. The earth under my knuckles slowly went stiff with frost and the possibility that I was never going to learn my fate – and never again going to return to my own time – began to become more and more real as the minutes passed.

Is this it, then? I asked myself, as even the chattering of my teeth and the shivering of my limbs seemed to give way to a strange sensation of warmth – one I knew was a very bad sign. I came all the way back here to die of something I could just as easily have succumbed to in the woods at the bottom of the Renner's garden?

A feeling like drunkenness came over me shortly, my mind spinning the way it does when I've had one too many shots of cheap liquor at some house party or another. When I felt my wrists suddenly fall apart and my arms flop uselessly out onto the frost-hardened ground, I wasn't quite sure if I was imagining it or not. A few seconds later I
was in the air – or was I? Someone was laughing, too – a strange kind of laughter that didn't sound mirthful at all.

It was me laughing, stupefied with the winter chill as someone big – Esa – carried me over his shoulder and ducked under the threshold of the main house. Inside it was warmer, although not by much. A fire burned in a large fire-pit, above which a large hole allowed the smoke up and eventually out into the darkness of the night. I blinked as my eyes adjusted to the dim light and the awful smell, and soon realized, on my way up stairs to the second level of the house, that the entire first floor was full of animals. Had my mouth been working, and had I not been in fear for my life, I would have asked what that was all about.

On the second floor, the man carrying me suddenly stopped. I would have looked up, but I was still too weak and clumsy with the cold.

"What weakens her?"

The voice was new. Male, deep, authoritative. It could only be one man – the Lord who was to decide my fate.

"Baldric tied her to the washing post, my Lord. She was without a tunic."

A small commotion, the sound of footsteps on the stairs, and then Baldric's voice spoke up. "Her dressings fell off in the fight, Lord. And make no mistake but it was a fight – she came for your men a second time, throwing poison into the eyes of your Eadward and Thurgis. I'm sorry that I didn't think to waste a sheepskin on this North –"

"Enough!" The Lord's voice rang out, silencing Baldric. "Esa put her down in front of me, I'll hear it from her if you bunch of bickering women don't mind?"

Any other circumstance and I would have chuckled at that comment and the similarity it bore to so many I'd heard in the 21st century. These men had no idea what a combustion engine was, but they snickered just as surely as any frat boy at the comparison of their male friends to women.

A second later I felt myself unceremoniously dumped onto a wooden floor. I moved my eyes in the direction of the Lord's voice, because my body was still too stiff from the cold to sit properly.

"Fetch a sheepskin, Baldric. And next time you manage to catch a Northwoman on my land, try not to kill her before I can question her, do you hear?"

But my –"

"NOW, Baldric!"

When he returned, I almost whimpered with gratefulness at the feeling of a sheepskin being laid around my shoulders. The Lord waited patiently for me to regain the ability to move and I sat up on the rough wooden logs that formed the floor as soon as I could, sensing that it wouldn't do me any good to appear as anything other than respectful towards the man who now held my fate in his hands.

The Lord of the estate was seated on a chair that itself sat on a wooden platform raised a few inches higher than the rest of the floor. A white fur lay around his shoulders and leather straps bound more fur around his calves and feet. If I'd had to guess I could have put the man in his fifties, with the graying hair that lay across his shoulders and his weather-worn features. His eyes narrowed as he beheld me and in his gaze I saw
something I recognized – intelligence.  

"A Northwoman?" He asked – and I couldn't tell if he was addressing me or the whole room. By the time I'd opened my mouth to try to respond, he spoke again. "A Northwoman, Baldric? By the way you told it yesterday eve, I thought you'd encountered a lady giant at Oyster Bay. This one's bigger than most, to be sure, but you're telling me she got the best of you? And then, today of almost all three of you?"

It was only then that I noticed the other two men – Eadward and Thurgis and some others I didn't recognize – seated in the shadows along the sides of the room. They were shifting uncomfortably at the Lord's questioning of their prowess, but once again Baldric jumped in.

"My Lord! With respect, she threw poison in their eyes. A great red mist of such strength it left them unable to see or even to breath for many moments!"

The Lord fixed his eyes on Baldric. "Unable to breath, eh? Is that what you say? I'm surprised to see them still alive, then, if what you say is true."

"It's true," another voice piped up – one of the two who'd been on the receiving end of my pepper spray. "My eyes burn still, my Lord. My wife tried to wash them with boiled water and dressed them with dock leaves, but in truth it just made the pain worse. I can still feel the poison in my mouth –"

"Come here!" The Lord boomed suddenly. "If you've truly been poisoned, come here and show me these eyes you say burn still with it!"

"Show him, Thurgis," Baldric urged, as I noted with some relief that the attention had, at least momentarily, been taken off me. The smaller of the two men I had encountered in the woods stood up and made his way respectfully to the Lord, where he kneeled and turned his head towards the light emanating from one of two large candles placed on small wooden tables that sat on either side of the Lord's chair.

"There is some redness," I heard the Lord say as he examined Thurgis's eyes. "Some swelling, too. Poison was it, Thurgis? Is that what you say?"

But Thurgis was not as eager to give the impression that he'd been bested by some kind of superwoman as his friend Baldric. He nodded his head. "Aye my Lord, but as you can see I stand here before you alive and hale, excepting the painful eyes and mouth, so I'm not sure I can say it was poison. It was definitely the –"

"Poison it was!" Baldric cut in, shouting pompously over the conversation. "I saw its effects with my own eyes, Lord, there can be no mistaking –"

"Oh sit down, Baldric," the Lord responded with a weary wave of his hand. "I've enough dramatics with my daughters – the last thing I need is more from you."

With an exaggerated sigh, Baldric sat on a spindly wooden chair at the side of the room, an aggrieved look on his face. The Lord continued the inspection of his Thurgis for a few more minutes, really taking his time, and then gestured for him to return to his spot at the side of the room. He then turned back to me.

"What is it you used on my men, woman? Juice of the false-berry? Thurgis and Baldric say the liquid was red, and false-berry juice is white as milk. Tell me what it was, and how you got it."

With the Lord's simple command to tell him what it was I'd sprayed his men with, I
felt all the eyes in the room back on me. I opened my mouth, which had still not thawed entirely, and began to stutter something out:

"I – uh, I, my Lord, it was a, um –"

My mind ran utterly blank, unable in its fear to come up with anything even resembling a flimsy excuse. False-berry? Is that what the Lord had mentioned? What the hell was a 'false-berry'?

The Lord did not take his eyes off me as I stammered and blinked in front of him like an idiot, and his steady gaze only served to unnerve me more fully.

"I didn't mean to," I said eventually, deciding that an apologetic tone was better than nothing. "I didn't mean to hurt your men. It wasn't poison. They're not dead are they? See – look, they're fine! I didn't want to hurt anyone, Lord. It –"

The Lord held up a hand suddenly and I stopped talking. "The girl's full of excuses," he commented and there were a few nods in response. "And look at her – a Northwoman you say, Baldric? The Northwomen are more robust than our kind, but look at this one – look at her height and those sturdy limbs. She doesn't sound like any Northwoman I've ever heard, either. Where is it you're from, girl? And don't answer me with a mouthful of pudding again, lest my patience begin to wear thin."

I was pretty sure I'd just been warned not to give another weak, meandering answer to the Lord of the estate. But in the relative warmth of the big house, the blood had begin to flow inside me again and my thoughts were racing with plans and priorities. Number one of which was to delay any hangings from the ramparts for as long as possible, so as to give myself enough time to find a way out of that place, back to the tree and back to 2017, with or without my stupid phone. I barely suppressed a loud, bitter explosion of laughter at how quickly the possession of that phone had gone from near necessity to totally unimportant. Why did I ever think it mattered enough to come back to this place, and to take such a risk?

"I'm not a Northwoman," I said in a quiet but mostly steady voice. "I'm not from here, either. I'm lost. I lost my way in the woods a few days ago and all I want now is to go home to my family."

"A high family you're from, is it?" The Lord asked, gesturing for me to come closer. I inched towards him and averted my eyes as he examined me from a closer angle. "I've never seen teeth so straight and white. Not on my own children – not even on the King's children. Never!"

"Aye," Esa chimed in. "I noticed it, too. Northwoman or East Angle, she's no peasant."

The Lord was looking at me, awaiting an answer. "Yes," I nodded quickly, assuming that by 'high' family he meant one of high status – one he may not want to anger by executing their daughter. "A very high family, Lord."

"What's your father's name, then? I know all the Lords from all the estates in the Kingdom of East Anglia – and further yet than that. Which estate is it you come from, girl?"

I refused to show how afraid I was. Instead I met the Lord's gaze straight on before answering his question. "It's farther away than that. It's east of –"

I stopped then, as a collective drawing back occurred in the room, triggered by my use
of the word ‘east’ and followed almost at once by open frowns and hostile glances.

"South, I mean! I'm very cold and frightened, Lord, please forgive me. I come from the south."

"Wessex?!" Baldric bellowed, leaping to his feet as if I'd somehow impugned his honor by not being a Northwoman. "My Lord, listen to me, how can a woman alone have come this far north? It defies belief, my –"

Once again, the Lord held up his hand, sighing this time. "It's been a long ride today, hasn't it? I tire earlier than is my habit. Take the woman downstairs and put her with the animals – make sure to tie her firmly and leave water for her thirst. I'll deal with the pressing matters when the sun rises."

Shortly I found myself exactly where the Lord had told Esa to put me – tied to a corner post of one of the animal pens that filled the bottom floor of the big house. Beside me, the Lord's enormous guard placed a large bowl of not-entirely-clean looking water close enough so I could lower my head into and left me there without another word. After he left, I slumped back against the post, not even bothering to shoo it away when one of the hairy pigs stuck his snout into my water and took a long, noisy drink.

It was night time then, which meant it was night time back in 2017, in River Falls. And in the UK. I knew I didn't have much time – in fact I knew, given the hysteria around Paige's disappearance, that it may already have been too late. If my parents or sister or any of my friends got antsy and called the police when I stopped answering my phone, it wasn't going to take those police long to find my car abandoned less than half a mile away from Paige Renner's last known location.

I struggled fruitlessly against my restraints at the thought of my family worrying about me – fearing that something terrible had befallen me, the way everyone assumed it had Paige – but it was, once again, no use. The ropes used to bind me were thick and strong, and I could feel that there was no way I was breaking out of them.

Esa had taken me to the toilet before tying me up for the night – well, I say 'toilet' – what I mean is he'd taken me out back of the Lord's dwelling and unceremoniously instructed me to piss on the ground if I didn't want to spend the night holding it in. That meant, I hoped, that I would be untied and taken outside again come the morning. If Esa was distracted for even a moment, or if I could somehow manage to kick him in the balls hard enough, I could make a run for it.

But I couldn't make a run for it. Even if I could somehow manage to outwit or, hilariously, physically best a man who had at least 100 pounds on me, there were guards at the gates and no way out except through them.

I gave one more sharp tug against the ropes holding my wrists, tortured with scenes conjured up in my mind: somber police officers arriving on my parent's doorstep, telling them in low voices that their daughter was missing. The newscasts would soon commence after that, if I didn't turn up, lurid headlines, more grist for the mills of the conspiracy theorists and doom and gloomers that had come crawling out of the woodwork when Paige went missing.

More than I was able to torture myself with that what-ifs, though, I was tired. So tired my eyelids felt weighted, more tired than I could ever remember being. So in spite of the
desperation of my situation, my body and its basic need for rest reasserted itself and within moments I was asleep, with only the livestock for company.

I woke up many times during the night, roused from slumber by the sound of animals grunting or shifting, and had to endure the experience of briefly thinking I was at home in my apartment, in my own bed, until the smell and the cold led, over and over, to the remembrance of where I actually was.
I woke at close to dawn, my body stiff and creaky from having curled itself into a fetal position overnight in a futile attempt to keep warm. The animals were gone, let outside by someone who hadn't seen fit to wake me, or bring me anything to eat. I tried my restraints again, and found them still tightly knotted. It was dark on the lower floor of the Lord's house, with the fire long gone out and the winter wind coming through the gaps in the walls until it felt as if I had never been warm in my life.

My thoughts were with my family almost as soon as I'd shaken off the mental torpor of a bad night's sleep. It was morning where I was, and so it was morning in 2017. They would be calling, texting, asking me if I'd booked a flight. One small point of comfort was the thought that if I didn't answer right away they might assume I was already on my way home, but even that was tenuous, given how easy it would be to call my security detail and be told I'd gone off for a drive on my own the day before and had yet to return. It dawned on me, then, that my hired security had almost certainly noted my absence already – and probably called my parents in response.

I had to get home. I had to get home and it had to be soon, or when I did get home it was going to be a shit-show of such epic proportions I was probably going to wish I'd stayed in the 9th century, with its abundance of violent men and its distinct lack of efficient indoor heating.

There would be no time to ponder further, though, because Esa soon came to me, with an air of annoyance about him and a chunk of stale bread in his hand.

"God willing the Lord decides what to do with you today," he grumbled as he loosened my restraints and handed me the bread – which I shamelessly began to devour. "This is women's work, tending to prisoners, and I'm wasted spending my time on the likes of you."

I chewed the dry bread, swallowed and then swallowed again when it refused to go down the first time. "If it's women's work," I asked Esa, who was sullenly cleaning his fingernails with a small twig while I ate, "why are you doing it?"

He shrugged and sighed heavily. "I've no knowledge of the Lord's plans, girl. Eat your bread and keep your mouth shut."

I didn't sense any hostility from Esa, not really. There was no underlying wish to hurt me – or even kill me – like I'd sensed with Baldric. But he didn't care, either. I was an
animal to him, like one of the bristle-haired pigs, a thing to be cared for as long as it served his Lord's purposes to do so. Although he seemed to have no wish to dash my brains out with the heavy stone axe tied around his waist with a rope made of twisted straw, I didn't doubt for one second that he would do it if ordered to – and that he wouldn't lose sleep over it afterwards.

When I was finished eating, Esa wrapped his enormous, fat fingers around my upper arm and led me outside to relieve myself. It was embarrassing, squatting down in the dirt while various curious children and animals looked on – but what could I do?

And before I'd even managed to cover myself again, a familiar voice made itself heard.

"Bring her to me, Esa. I'll walk the grounds with our prisoner with morning."

That's how I found myself strolling out of the front gates with the Lord, as four guards trailed us at a not-far-enough-away-for-me-to-try-running distance. He'd ordered a woolen cape to be thrown over my shoulders, and stiff leather to be tied around my feet, the soles of which were still bloody and purple after the barefoot walk (where had my shoes gone? I must have lost them in the struggle) through the woods the previous day.

"You've had some sleep now, and bread to eat," the Lord said. "I've given you a wool dressing and leather for your feet. Perhaps now you can bring yourself to tell me where it is you're from, and how it is you came to attack my men so savagely on my land – not once, either, but twice!"

In the brighter light of the sunny day, I got a better look at the man who was in charge of the estate. He was slightly shorter than me, but he moved and carried himself with a sense of iron-clad confidence – the certainty of a man who knows that when he speaks, others will listen. His eyes were hazel, focused and intelligent – not only was I aware that running would be pointless, I was starting to think that lying would be, too. But how could I tell him the truth?

"And don't tell me," he added, as if reading my mind, "that you wandered here from Essex or Wessex or any southern parts – nobody 'wanders' that far without a motive."

"You're right," I started quietly, eager to show the Lord that I took him seriously. "I didn't wander here from the south. But I didn't come here – to your land, or your estate – with a purpose, either. It was an accident, I am looking for a friend –"

At that moment, there was a sudden hue and cry behind us in the woods.

"Lord!" Someone shouted, and then another, as they rushed down the path towards us. "Lord Cyneric!"

The voices were urgent, serious. I automatically stepped aside as 3 men came to a halt in front of my walking companion.

"What is –" the Lord of the estate started, but one of the men cut him off. I watched his eyes widen at this apparent rudeness, and saw one of the guards raising a gloved hand to strike the man who had given offense. Before he could do so, though, another man spoke.

"Northmen," he gasped. "My Lord –"

"Coming from the North," a second man took up the sentence that the first was panting too hard to finish. "Across the – the marshes are frozen, Lord – the land. They're
"Back!" Lord Cyneric – for I had just heard his full name for the first time – barked suddenly, breaking into a run as two of the guards each took one of my arms and swept me back along the path to the estate. "Back inside the walls!"

The walls, I thought as I was hustled back to the estate. What walls?! It's a tall fence at best!

The wooden gate, heavy as it was when it was pushed closed and then latched with a large piece of tree trunk, wasn't going to hold anyone – or anything – off. Was it? A large number of women and children had taken shelter within the bosom of the Lord's house and grounds and I watched as they disappeared, some of them dragging squealing pigs or leading irritated-looking cows – into the lower floor of the house itself. Should I be going with them? All around was an air of fear and anticipation. I looked around, searching for instruction on what to do. None came.

Before I, too, could turn and run into the security of the house, there came a noise from outside the estate and I watched as the Lord's men – and the Lord himself – heard it too. The ones that weren't already holding their weapons at the ready pulled them now from the leather and straw straps securing them around their waists. Hammers, axes, spears, swords. The guards, dressed in the heavy, dark woolens I was already learning to associate with their place in this small society, had the best and strongest-looking weapons. But it wasn't just guards standing wait for whatever was heading our way. Peasants lined up, with in their dirty tunics and their broken-toothed grimaces, raising flimsy-looking wooden spears – wooden spears! – over their heads in a way that did nothing to reassure me of their defensive prowess.

I swiveled my head again, sensing the rising tension, and spotted Esa headed my way with a heavy axe in each of his hands. When he went to walk by me without a word I reached out and clutched at his shirt.

"What should I do?" I whispered. "Esa, what –"

He looked down at me then, and I could tell from his expression that he hadn't even noticed me before I'd spoken. "What are you doing out here?" He responded angrily, shoving me back towards the house. "Get inside with the women and children, girl! Now!"

I did as I was told, breaking into a run and not quite making it before the sound of men approaching – of many, many men approaching – became so loud I knew they were just outside. It wasn't just the sound of heavy, running footsteps either. No. Horrifyingly, there was another sound – a metallic clanking that I only realized at the last second was the sound of weapons being smashed together, a sound calculated to intimidate.

It worked. Not just on me. As my eyes ran the length of the row of peasants I spotted two whose knee-length linen garments were in the midst of being soaked with urine. Just seeing that made my own bladder warm with terror. Northmen. The Northmen were upon us.

It was a term I'd heard repeatedly since I'd embarked on my visits to the deep past. And it was only as I stood frozen to the spot with terror that it dawned on me that it might be a reference to Vikings. They were from the north, weren't they? And who else inspired fear in 9th century English folk – villagers and nobles alike – than Vikings? If the
fearsome racket coming from outside was any indication, their terror was not misplaced.

Something kept me outside the Lord's house as the din died down – curiosity, yes. But it wasn't just that. If they were Vikings, maybe that was a good thing? Paige was with the Vikings now, wasn't she? She had a Viking's baby in her arms the last time I saw her. Surely I could explain to these people, even if Paige wasn't with them, that I wasn't a resident of the estate, that I was a captive and that I felt no loyalty towards my captors.

It was really stupid to think any of those things. From my readings I knew it wasn't a single band of Vikings that raided the east coast of England once. It was many bands, over a period of many decades, tens of thousands of men and, eventually, the women they almost certainly brought with them when they had a mind to settling the land they'd previously used only for plundering and pillaging. I had no reason to believe that Paige Renner would be among the group who threatened me now, and no reason to believe they'd listen to a single thing I had to say. Still, the mind grasps at straws when in a desperate situation.

Before I even had a chance to think about the accuracy of my assumptions, though, a great, fierce voice suddenly rang from outside.

"Lord Cyneric!" It boomed. "We told you we would be back. And this time, there are a thousand of us! We have burning oil at the ready to take down your palisades! But if you're an intelligent man – and it is as I know it to be – you would see that you're overwhelmed now and spare your estate the destruction we will wreak upon it if you heed your pride too well!"

Shrieks came from inside the Lord's house, and his guards and men turned their heads towards him, their eyes wide with the adrenaline coursing through their veins, awaiting his response.

"Aye!" He boomed back. "It was not a moon ago that I heard of the raid on the Eastmarsh estate. I do not wish to see my people or my land treated with such malevolence, Ragnar! But nor do I wish to see my women raped or my children slaughtered like lambs if I open the gates for you and instruct my men to lay down their arms!"

The two men knew each other, that was clear. The Northmen were not paying their first visit to Lord Cyneric or his estate. Also, words like 'rape' and 'slaughter' were being tossed around. I turned and looked over my shoulder – not at the house but at the wooden fencing behind it. The Northmen were outside the front gate, they could be heard massing there, all along the northern wall. I heard nothing from the southern side, although that didn't mean there was no one there.

If Lord Cyneric's guards had better things to do than chase down a female prisoner, did I think I could scale the palisade? The tree trunks weren't perfectly smooth, knots remained and stood out against the surfaces. I'd been pretty good at the climbing wall that had been installed in the Grand Northeastern gym during my sophomore year. Did I think I had a chance at hauling myself up and over the defenses of the estate?

I did. Maybe not a good one, but anything was preferable to staying where I was, dumbly awaiting my fate – wasn't it? I would have to wait for the right moment, though. I couldn't do it right away, with every man around me on high alert, just waiting for some
signal, some reason to use their weapons. I was a captive – not one of them – and they had no good reason to protect me.

"The Lord of Eastmarsh fought!" Came the reply from outside. "You know we outnumber you ten to one, Cyneric. You know our weapons are sharper, our men stronger! You have my word that those who do not fight us will be allowed to live – now open your gates before my men get impatient and storm them anyway!"

I watched as Lord Cyneric turned around slowly, eying his people. His gaze rested for a longer time on the house that sheltered the women and children than it did anywhere else. He knew the decision was his to make, and he also knew, as far as I could tell from the look on his face, that if he chose to fight he would lose.

"Fuck them!" Came a shout from the crowd of guards. "Lord, let us die defending our land and our families! Don't ask us to put down our weapons while this band of savages from the north –"

"Shut your mouth, Elread!" Someone else shouted in response. "You're too young and stupid to understand what slaughter means – and make no mistake, it will be a slaughter! We –"

"He wishes to surrender! What kind of a man begs his Lord to –"

At that, the two guards launched themselves at each other, and others looked like they were about to join in when Cyneric bellowed at them to stand down.

"It's my decision alone," he growled at the man who had been responsible for the first outburst. "And if I throw caution to the cold winds, and your pretty young wife is raped by Northmen before they cut your unborn son from her belly and toss his body to the pigs, it will be me you hate, my responsibility. Don't speak so lightly of the things you know nothing about, boy!"

The guard, hearing his Lord's words, dropped his gaze to the ground and did not reply. Meanwhile, Cyneric continued, louder now, speaking to all his people.

"I don't have a choice! There are many more of them and you heard as well as I did what happened at Eastmarsh. Ragnar! Our gates will be opened! And all the curses of your northern gods be upon you if your break your vow to leave those who lay down their weapons unharmed!"

At that, the Lord nodded at the guards who stood on either side of the gate and, after a brief look at each other, they began to lift the tree trunk that held the gate against the invaders. When it was removed, the latch swung open with a heavy thud.

And then I watched, transfixed and momentarily unaware of how cold and hungry I was, how eager to leave this place, as a man who looked to be twice the size of lord Cyneric stepped over the threshold of the estate and stood, feet planted about a foot apart, looking over us. Ragnar.

His hair was long and dark, with glints of a deep red shining in the thin winter light, and he was as broad and thick with muscle as anyone I had ever seen. He stayed where he was for a long time, his chin raised arrogantly and a smile I couldn't decipher playing at the corner of his lips, until I could hear the Lord's guards begin to shift worriedly and steal glances down at the ground where their weapons lay.

"You've made a wise decision, Cyneric," Ragnar said finally, nodding down at the Lord
"Respect!" Someone shouted from the gathered crowd. "Address our Lord with respect, savage!"

The Viking – for there could be no mistaking what he was – laughed at that comment and at once there was a sound of running footsteps, an enraged shout, and I felt my heart leap up into my throat. Ragnar had the time to throw a look at the assembled crowd, of the type you would give to a misbehaving child, before lifting a sword so large, with a blade so sharp its edges glinted in the sunlight, up over his head.

The movement was almost casual, as if the weapon were weightless – but the timing was perfect. I bit my tongue against a scream as Ragnar's weapon carved a smooth arc through the air and cut Lord Cyneric's man down with a single blow. He died so quickly he didn't even have time to make a sound, and the life was gone out of him before he'd even hit the frozen ground.

Ragnar looked up then, drawing his bloody sword across the furs which covered him almost from head to foot, and a deep red stain spread across the frozen earth under the man he had just killed.

"Who else?" He asked, looking plainly from man to man, his eyes an open challenge to anyone who wanted to try their luck.

I stayed where I was, blinking and uncomprehending, unable to look at what seemed, out of the corner of my eyes, to be perhaps a pile of old clothes or a sleeping animal – and not the remains of a human being whose heart had, just moments ago, beat as strong and true as my own.

It struck me then that I had come to a savage place – and it made me wonder why Paige had chosen to live out the rest of her life amidst such brutality. The press hounding and the internet taunts were awful, but was this any kind of alternative? Barely any protection against the weather, a rigid, inescapable hierarchy and the possibility of a violent death as a constant? I reckoned that I would take the intrusive questions from a few reporters.

Ragnar began to explain what was to happen to Lord Cyneric and his men. And what was to happen was surrender. The Northmen – the Vikings – were not at the estate to negotiate. They were there to take what they wanted and leave the rest. Lord Cyneric would be allowed to stay on his land, and to keep a small crew of peasants – enough to ensure neither he nor his wife and children would starve or freeze to death – but everything else, including the Lord's sworn loyalty, belonged to Ragnar and his warriors.

And at once, they set to claiming their spoils. I watched as grain stores were raided and livestock carried off. The estate's people watched, too, averting their eyes when they thought the Vikings were observing them, staring with open contempt when they thought they weren't. And as naive as I was to the ways of that world, it couldn't have been plainer to see that, given the chance, the villagers would take their revenge.

The cold seeped through the leathers on my feet and, after watching for a short time longer, fascinated and still not entirely sure that I wasn't just having the most realistic dream of my entire life, I turned to return to the main house, where maybe I could find a spot close enough to the fire to rid my body of the chill.
"YOU!"
I froze. Surely he wasn't talking to me?
"Yes, girl, you! Turn back around!"

I turned around, shifting my glance from side to side, wondering what it was I'd done to draw the Viking leader's attention. Had I offended him?

"We've a camp set up by the sea," he began, addressing everyone. "And scouts posted in the woods, so you'd be wise not to send word to the King too quickly! I hear your King is being kept busy by my people, as it is, so best not to risk your life begging the help of a weakened man. We've taken all but one thing that we need from you now."

All but one thing? When Ragnar paused I looked around, trying to figure out what it was the Vikings hadn't yet taken possession of. When I glanced up again, his eyes were on me.

"We need people!" He declared. "We need farmers, soldiers, herdsmen for the animals. We need midwives and healers. And most of all right now, we need companionship – women to keep our beds warm through this long winter."

And then Ragnar nodded, almost imperceptibly, at the guards standing to either side of him. With no ceremony at all, they strode out into the crowd of villagers, grabbing people as they went, demanding to know who was who, who played what role, who was the best at this or that task. Lord Cyneric hung his head, unable to watch.

"Girl!"

I turned my head up as Ragnar approached me, forcing myself not to take a step back when he was close, so as to avoid showing him just how intimidated I was.

"Show me your hands, girl!"

I was so worried about doing or saying the wrong thing that I hadn't even listened to what he was saying. "Uh – what?" I babbled. "I'm sorry, I didn't –"

Ragnar did not ask to see my hands a second time. He simply reached down and grabbed my arms himself, inspecting my hands and wrists. I briefly wondered if he was checking for signs of wear, for hints at what my task might be in the small society of the estate. But it wasn't that he was interested in. He ran his fingers over my wrists, where the tell-tale bruises from the rope I'd been tied with darkened the skin.

"And who are you that they've seen fit to bind you?" He asked.

I couldn't quite look at him, not with him right there in front of me, mere inches away. But even without seeing him I could feel him – his presence, his sheer size. I could smell the sea and the cold winter air on his body, too.

"I – I –" I stammered, staring at the ground, terrified after what I'd just witnessed happen to the last person who displeased the Viking. "I was –"

"You're not one of these people, are you?" He asked, grasping my chin and forcing me to look up at him.

His eyes were the color of ice, limpid blue and cold and set in a broad, noble face. I got the distinct impression, looking up into Ragnar's eyes, that he had never suffered a moment's self-doubt in all his life. I shook my head in answer to his question, and then coughed when nothing more than a whisper came from my throat when I tried to speak.

"What was that? No? Who are you, girl? A prisoner?"
"A prisoner for a damned good reason!" A voice piped up. Baldric. "She attacked the Lord's men – twice! Tried to poison two of his guards, good men, men I've known –"

"Does this man speak the truth?" Ragnar asked, his eyes suddenly dancing with what might have been amusement. "You attacked the Lord's guards?"

I turned to Baldric, who was looking unreasonably smug for a man whose Lord has just given most of their winter food stocks to an invading force. "Is it an attack when the other person strikes first?" I asked, addressing my erstwhile captor directly. "That's not an attack, it's simple defense. Why shouldn't I have fought back when you tried to take me on the beach? Did you expect me to give in as meekly as you've done here, today?"

Baldric erupted with showy indignation at that comment. "What?!" He yelled, as his cheeks reddened. "Baint! I won't be spoken to like that by a –"

But Ragnar's laughter soon drowned out any remaining fire Baldric had in him. "Twice she attacked, you say?" He asked Baldric. "Now it's three times – three times a woman's got the best of you. I'm not surprised you're so eager to condemn her."

I could hear shrieks around me. People were being taken. Kidnapped. But I knew I couldn't betray any unease. It was good for me if the Vikings thought I wasn't one of the villagers – it put me on the same side as them, and it's always good to be on the same side as the victors.

"What's your name, girl?" Ragnar asked me, after Baldric had slunk away, defeated. "Emma."
"You've no people here?"
I shook my head.
"You were a prisoner?"
I nodded.
"Then you'll be pleased to come with us, then."

I didn't know if 'pleased' was the right word for him to use. I was 'pleased' to leave the estate in one piece. Beyond that, I didn't know enough about what was about to happen to me to have any opinions on it. All I wanted was to get back to the tree. The Vikings had a camp near the sea – the tree was near the sea. Hopefully I would be able to find my way back to it.

My quiet optimism seemed warranted when, upon leaving the estate, the Vikings chose to bind the wrists of the villagers – and not me. We walked in a group with Ragnar and half of his strongest guards at the front, two in the middle to keep an eye on the captives, and a further twenty or so taking up the rear. I noticed that their numbers were nowhere near what the Viking leader had stated, when they stood outside the estate and threatened Lord Cyneric with brutality if he did not surrender.

The light was fading by then, too – it had taken the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon to claim a large portion of the estate's wealth – but I kept my eyes up even as my head stayed down, trying to catch a glimpse of something even vaguely familiar.

I smiled to myself at the sight of the path back to the tree, leading away from the area where the remains of a few huts littered a clearing in the woods. Even as the Vikings led us down a different path, in the direction of the sea, it was enough to have seen the way home – even if I couldn't yet get to it. They hadn't tied me up. I could slip out after
dark, find my way back to the tree and then back to 2017 where my family and the rest of my life awaited me.
Our temporary encampment on the coast had, at the time of the raid on Lord Cyneric's estate, been established long enough to have some semblance of a routine in place. There would be a feast that night, as there was almost every night that winter, with the East Angle's defenses so thin and their stores of salted pork, cheese and grain so ripe for the taking.

The new captives would be fed and put to work right away. It had been easy so far. Easy enough to make me question if my people weren't, perhaps, walking into some larger trap in the kingdom of rolling hills and plentiful game. The clans of the north had been raiding the green isle for many winters, but there was growing talk of something bigger and more permanent – of conquest instead of mere pillage. I was part of a vanguard of the highest Jarls, all of whom had sailed across the gray sea to test the Angles – and their land. How easily could they be conquered? How willing were their kings and lords to accept subordination in exchange for their lives? How fertile was their soil?

Not all men are lucky enough to be born into a role they relish, but the gods saw fit to endow me with a nature that took to raiding the way the spring lambs take to gamboling. Valhalla awaits, life is fickle, what is there to do but follow your nature, raise your children and send them out into the world carrying your name with them into eternity? Not that I had any children at that time. I was not yet twice ten and five and the sap rose high in me still – too high to allow me to choose the sweet shackles of marriage and family just yet.

"Jarl, the prisoners cry for their supper."

I jerked my head up, where it had been nodding down against the table in my temporary Jarl's roundhouse, and allowed the irritation that rose in my chest to drive the sleep away from my mind. "You must feed them then, dullard. How many times have I told you about coming to me with small concerns, Halfgan?"

Halfgan, as usual when he was questioned, simply stood silently in front of me, seeming not to recognize that a reply was expected of him. "Why are you even bothering with the captives? I need a hot bath before the feast – let the women tend to the prisoners!"

"But the women, Jarl, they said –"
I stood up, then, and gestured for Halfgan to leave, which he did. Scarcely two winters younger than me, he seemed to be a boy of ten in temperament. But he was the son of my father's great friend and I had been pressed to take him into my service when everyone realized he was never going to be fit for the warrior's life. He took instructions well enough, as long as they were clear, and usually repeated about three times.

When the bath was ready and I had lowered my cold, aching limbs into the steaming water, I bid the bathing woman to bring me the girl from the estate, the one with bruised wrists. The raid hadn't exactly been challenging, but the men and I often found raiding to be more of an excuse to indulge what desires we would have indulged anyway, with the veneer of tradition now smoothed over our young men's urges. The tradition was raiding, and then women. A fight, the hardness of men trying to kill each other, and then the soft warmth of a woman. I had girls in the camp, some quite well-born girls, but something about the look of that one on the estate had my blood running a little hotter than usual – and it usually ran hot.

It wasn't just her look, as fair and smooth-cheeked as that was. It was something in the way she'd looked at me, before she let fear drive her eyes away from mine. I was Jarl Ragnar, son of Jarl Augnarr, and women had been looking at me in a certain way since I was too young to know what to do with them. It was one of the constants of my life, that look. Soft, coy – eager. The girl on the estate didn't have that look in her eye. In its place had been a surprisingly even gaze. She'd thought herself my equal, I'd seen it on her face. My curiosity at a woman who saw me unselfconsciously as of equal rank to herself, even if it was only for a moment before she caught herself and looked away, was piqued.

The heat of the water sank into my flesh, loosening bones and muscles tightened by cold, and I let my mind wander to what might be underneath the girl's tunic. When the flap to the roundhouse was lifted back I felt a stab of rage at the sight of Halfgan – alone.

"Voss! Halfgan, where is she? Why is it that the simplest tasks –"

"She's gone, Jarl," he spoke before I was finished – an offense I would have whipped him for if I thought him smart enough to realize he'd done it – and I knew at once that he was serious due to the fear on his face.

"What?" I asked, standing up from my bath as the steam rose from my body and into the bracing air – and unconcerned about the fact that Halfgan was now being treated to a full view of just how eager I was to see the girl prisoner. "WHAT?! She's gone? Gone where?!"

I jumped out of the wooden tub, roaring loud enough for the whole camp to hear me, and at once three of my personal guards charged in, dipping their heads respectfully before speaking.

"She can't be far, Jarl. The women gave her bread and cheese not long ago. The ground is frosty, her footprints will be visible. We'll ride out now and bring her back to –"

But I wasn't about to let my men ride out without me, in search of the wench. She'd escaped – and after we'd rescued her from her captors, allowed her to walk back with us unbound! If there's one thing I cannot abide, it's an ungrateful woman.

"Get my horse," I barked. "I'll find her myself."
It was a night so cold it half made me think I was at home, with the winds that sweep down from the real north howling outside my longhouse. But I wasn't at home, I was in the woods on the eastern coast of the Kingdom of the East Angles, tracking down a girl who'd be lucky to have her life by the time the dawn broke.

It wasn't difficult to find her – wherever she got her defiance from, it wasn't from someone who'd taught her how to cover her tracks. I urged my horse along gently, not wanting him to make a sound to alert the girl to my pursuit, and soon enough I came upon her, standing in the middle of a clearing and looking this way and that, utterly lost.

Not that being utterly lost stopped her trying to run when she spotted me. She stumbled soon enough, her limbs slowed by a cold the East Angles weren't used to. And when she stumbled, I jumped off my horse and snatched her up off the ground by the tunic the women had dressed her in. She twisted her head around then, not as weakened by the chill wind as I'd assumed, and Thor's fury if she didn't try to bite me. To bite me.

"Voss!" I bellowed, loosening my grip enough to let her twist free, and then angrily making up the distance she managed to flee in two or three strides, taking hold of her once again to the sound of her anguished screams. What did this woman have to scream about?

"What is it you wail about?" I demanded, tightening my grip on the handful of dark hair I held in my hand. "You'd be dead by dawn, girl – sooner still than that – if it weren't for me riding out for you. It's the second time today you've been saved by a Northman and what do I get? A wild beast of a girl, trying to tear my flesh from my bones with her little white teeth?!!"

Even in my anger, the flashing brightness of the girl's teeth under the moonlight caught my eye and made me wonder once again where it was she came from, to have apparently had a childhood free of hunger and sickness.

I felt her go limp under my grip, then, and watched as she turned towards me, shrugging my hand off her shoulder the way I might shrug off the attentions of one of the bathing thralls.

"What did you say?" She asked coldly, and I was so completely stymied by her imperious tone that I laughed out loud.

"Who do you think you are, girl, to speak to me in that voice? Are you the Queen of the Angles, is that it? Is that why you look at me with that fire in your eyes, which isn't going to achieve anything but a beating if you're not careful?"

"You're not going to beat me."

I raised my hand at the provocation and then, before I could bring it down on her insolent head, saw that, somehow, I was being challenged. Not to hit her, but to not hit her. The way a mother will eye a child on the verge of a tantrum, daring them to maintain control of themselves. Left without the option of hitting the girl who taunted me with her eyes, I let my arm drop to my side.

"Perhaps you are the Queen of the Angles? You certainly don't seem false in your belief that it's right to speak to a Jarl in the manner that you do."
"I'm not the queen of anything," she responded, calmer now that my hand no longer hung over her head. "I'm just trying to get home. And I wouldn't quite say you rescued me today. Nor would I say that's what you're up to right now."

"Oh you wouldn't? I've known you less than a day," I told her, and I could not keep the smile from my face, "and yet I'm not surprised. You'll die out here, do you understand? I'm here to take you back to the camp, where there's a fire to warm you, meat for your belly and furs for your sleep. How is it, again, that I am not rescuing you?"

The girl wrapped her arms tightly around herself, feeling the cold, and my hand twitched to remove my cape. I stopped myself from doing so, not willing to concede the situation yet.

"You're not here to rescue me," she repeated. "You're here because you're angry I left – I can see it on your face. You don't like being defied, that's why your here. Not because you care for my safety or comfort. What is it you intend to do? Put me to work? Rape me?"

I felt my eyebrows nearly leave the top of my head. "Rape you? Rape you, woman?! I'd soon as toss you into the sea as lay a hand on you, you little demon. And as to being defied, where is the insult there? I'm the Jarl. Nobody defies me. It's not," I paused, searching for the right words – "it's not how it is with my people."

Emma and I stood eying each other, and I could not escape the feeling that she had in some way bested me, despite the fact that I'd thwarted her attempt to flee (and probably saved her life, although that was apparently not worth mentioning) and was about to drag her back to the camp.

"You've a quick tongue," I told her, "but it's cold out here and clever words won't save you from the frost. If you promise to take that look out of your eyes I'll put you on my horse and let you ride back."

"No." She replied simply, taking a step back – a step I immediately remedied by grabbing her tunic and pulling her back to me.

I shook my head, laughing again. "You can't mean it, girl. Is there some magic afoot? Have the gods protected you from the weather? I see you shivering, so I don't think it so. So you choose if you want to come back on my horse, or attached to a rope and led back like a wayward calf."

She only gave in because she was cold, and I could still plainly see the fire of defiance burning in her eyes as I bound her wrists – what reason to take further chances? – before lifting her onto my horse. I knew, even as I generously instructed the household thralls to build the fire up in the prisoner's roundhouse for Emma, and to feed her again and give her a sheepskin to lay underneath her body as she slept, that instead of thanks I would get only another attempt to flee – and another and another.

What did this girl have to flee to that was so much better than the food and warmth at the camp? I pondered this question when I retired to my dwelling to dress for the feast and dismissed Halfgan's offer to bring me one of my favored girls later that night. Perhaps Emma truly believed she was about to be made a servant herself? A stupid belief, as anyone could see she hadn't the temperament for serving.

And if she hadn't the temperament for serving, and she wasn't one of the Lord's...
daughters, and not a queen herself, as she'd assured me – then what was she?
Come the morning, Arva and Fiske – my most trusted advisors – met me at the breakfast table, where we ate the little dried fish that made up so much of the winter diet. There was some thickness in my head from the previous night's feast – the one I had been late for after chasing that foolish girl through the frozen woods – but I knew good food and drink would send it away.

"The spring will be here before you know," I said, seeing the downcast look in my friends' eyes. "I've been told this is an unusually cold winter for the Kingdom. We need to move ahead with the conquest of these people, settle down, build a village that can't be taken down by a high wind. I see the high days of many summers ahead. We'll have fertile land, fruit and berries aplenty, and the people of this place will know us as their rulers. But first, we must work."

Arva pushed a lock of blonde hair off her pale face and pressed her lips together in an approximation of a smile. "I know it, Jarl. You keep us well, and we're grateful for it. It's only the season brings us low, and we know it will soon pass."

"A message in the night," Fiske piped up then, always eager to get to the meat of any gathering. "From Jarl Eirik, who is encamped more permanently a day or two up the coast, to the north. He seeks out the counsel of the other Jarls already in this land."

"Ah yes," I replied, thinking of my childhood friend. "I have not seen Jarl Eirik since we were boys, playing at being warriors while our fathers led the people. He seeks counsel when the weather turns warm?"

Fiske shook his head. "Sooner. As soon as can be managed."

"Was that it?" I asked, curious about Jarl Eirik's apparent urgency. Surely there were many more estates to take before the return of summer and the discussion of how to conquer and order our new lands. "Is he ill? Has something happened?"

"There was no mention of it, Jarl. Only that he seeks your counsel."

"Perhaps a trip to see your boyhood friend would be good for you?" Arva suggested, in her gently persistent way. "I won't pretend the raids have been arduous lately, but your men – and your people – could do with a time free of worry to welcome the new year."

Arva was quieter than Fiske, her manner softer, but she was no less intelligent for it. She was right, too. My people had the necessities of life – food and fire and protection – but what they did not have that winter in the Kingdom of the East Angles was peace of
mind. Almost every day their Jarl and his warriors rode out on raids, which meant almost
every day the people left behind were flooded with worry until we returned. They knew
as well as we did that past ease did not necessarily indicate future ease. They knew that
one estate being no trouble to take did not indicate the next would be so. And they also
knew that eventually the battle with the King would be upon us, and that such a battle
would not be easy.

I nodded at Arva and Fiske, indicating that I'd heard all they had to say.
"Are you leaving already, Jarl?" Arva asked, eying me pointedly.
"Aye, I am," I told her, slightly puzzled. "Why? Is there some other matter that needs
my attention? Fiske? How about you?"

Arva suddenly took a great interest in one of the ties holding her woolen cape around
her shoulders. "I thought you might like to eat some more before you leave, Jarl," she
replied. And then, a few seconds later – as was her manner – she said what she'd been
meaning to say in the first place. "I hear you've taken interest in one of the prisoners
from Lord Cyneric's estate. Is that where you go in such a hurry at this early hour? To
check on her?"

I opened my mouth to respond and then snapped it shut again as I watched
something almost imperceptible pass between my two advisors – some tiny shift in body
language, a slight changing of the tilt of Fiske's head. It was knowledge I saw passed
between them.

"I see word has already spread of my evening ride," I smiled, and my smile gave Fiske
and Arva their own permission to smile back, slightly sheepishly because they knew I'd
caught them taking an interest in matters of less than life-or-death importance – in
gossip.

Fiske shrugged, pretending in that way that men pretend, even as their interest in
delicious personal matters is just as strong, that somehow the subject is only fit for
women. Arva immediately saw this and laughed out loud.

"Look at him! Acting as if he weren't the one in such a hurry to tell me of your pursuit
of the prisoner, Jarl!"

Arva and I both turned to Fiske, who had suddenly spotted something outside that
needed his attention.

"I reported on what the men spoke of when we woke," he grumbled, getting to his
feet. "If you'd rather I keep you out of these matters, Arva, I would be happy to –"

"Go!" I ordered him, still grinning at his reaction to being caught. "Go and take care of
your tasks, Fiske. When I have a response for Jarl Eirik you will be the first I speak to of
it."

When my advisor had scuttled away I turned back to Arva and shook my head. "Don't
be so hard on Fiske. He does his job well – and he's a man. He needs to think of himself
as honorable."

"And a woman has no need to think of herself that way?" Arva responded at once, her
eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Oh, I'm sure you do," I told her. "I'm sure of it. But even as we're bigger than you,
and our shoulders broader, men are brittle in our own ways. Aren't we? His withered arm
has kept him from a warrior's life and it's made Fiske very sensitive to his value. All I ask is that you keep it in mind."

Arva nodded then, as she listened. "Of course, Jarl Ragnar. I'll be more gentle with him."

"Is there anything else?" I asked, readying myself to leave. "Any problems with the captives, any sickness within their ranks?"

Arva shook her head. "Not as such, Jarl. Some of them are malnourished, but not badly. Four of the women are pregnant. We'll feed the ones who need it and, when the earth softens after this cold, put them to work."

I nodded and turned to leave, but Arva wasn't finished with me yet. "Is it as I assumed?" She added quickly, before I was out of earshot. "You rush off to see the girl prisoner from Lord –"

I stopped in my tracks and raised a single eyebrow at my sometimes just-a-little-too-forward advisor. "First, Arva, I do not rush. Where do you see the rush in me?" She declined to answer, although I thought I saw something in her expression that said she wished to, even as she held it back. "Second, there are important matters that require your attention. I scarcely think it worth your time to spend it on my recapture of an escapee. The raid was easy yesterday, I required more exercise to whet my appetite before the feast, nothing more."

I shouldn't have included that last part about needing more exercise before the feast. It was that, more than anything else, that made me appear defensive. But it was too late and Arva, respectful as she knew to be at the right moments, was carefully concealing her woman's skepticism at my assurances that I wasn't interested in the prisoner – the beautiful, young, female prisoner with the way about her that I seemed already to be slightly mesmerized by.

The day was, once again, hard-edged with cold. On my way to the longhouse where the prisoners were being kept as we sorted through them and what to do with each one, I stopped one of the household thralls and bid her fetch me one of the thick bearskins we'd brought with us on our journey across the Northern Sea. When it was in my arms, I continued at a brisk pace, blissfully unaware of how right Arva had been about my hurry.
Of all the captives from Lord Cyneric's estate, I was the last to wake the next day. We were all crowded into a tent-like structure made from animal skins stretched over a frame of thin, flexible saplings. A large fire pit, filled with dimming embers, sat in the center of the space and my fellow prisoners clustered tightly around it. When I moved to get closer to the heat, someone casually shoved me away and I, still drowsy from a terrible night's sleep, just sat back on the dirt floor, pulling the woolen tunic one of the Viking women had given me tightly around my body and wondering if I was ever going to be warm again. My stomach began to rumble as the smell of something delicious – was that bacon? – began to waft into the shelter.

Within a couple of minutes two girls entered with large wooden plates piled high with chunks of dark bread in their hands. A third girl followed with a little wooden cask that she lifted with a loud grunt onto the single piece of furniture – a crude wooden table – in the hut. I watched as the bread was passed out, snatching my own piece from the hand of one of the girls and stuffing it into my mouth with haste, before anyone could think to steal it from me. And after bread came a heavy clay mug of light, amber-colored liquid. I leaned down, sniffing, and wrinkled my nose.

"What is this?" I asked, and at once I felt a number of pairs of eyes on me.

And just as quickly as the attention had focused on me it was swept away, and onto a new target when someone walked in through the leather flap behind me. The girls bearing bread and strange drinks immediately bowed their heads respectfully, followed by the other prisoners. All except me, because I still hadn't been in the past long enough to learn the reflexive social niceties of the place. I turned around, shielding my eyes from the bright morning light and saw, silhouetted in the doorway, a broad and familiar figure. Ragnar.

"It's ale, girl," he said, taking the mug from my hands and draining it before handing it back to one of the servant girls with a nod to fill it again. "And if you knew what was good for you, you'd take your sustenance before questioning its bringers."

"Ale?" I asked, confused. "For breakfast?"

Were the Vikings trying to get the prisoners drunk? And if so, why? I'd thought we were going to be used to work, but how could we work efficiently if we were all stumbling around wasted? These questions and more ran through my mind, distracting me from the
fact that there was a new tension in the air. A few moments later, as the Jarl sternly
declined to answer my question, I looked around to discover that everyone was staring at
me.

"What?" I asked, mildly annoyed. "I just asked a question. I was just wondering why _"

"COME WITH ME!"

Before I even realized what was happening, Ragnar had clamped one of his
enormously strong hands onto my arm and whisked me out into the chilly
morning.

"What are you doing?" I protested, trying unsuccessfully to twist my arm out of his
grip as a natural anger at being hauled away like a misbehaving toddler rose up in my
chest. "Let me go! What the fuck are you – I just asked a question! ALL I DID WAS ASK A
– OH! Oh my GOD!"

Ragnar, leader of this freezing and godforsaken camp, seemingly beloved and
respected by his people, had plunged my face full-on into a fresh snowdrift. And now he
was standing back, trying not to laugh at me as I panted and clenched my fists with the
shock of the cold snow.

Like my mother, I don't lose my temper often. There are people who have known me
for years who have never seen me lose it. But when I do - again, just like my mum – I
really do. And nothing infuriates me more than people who seem to think it's fine for
them to treat others in a way that, were the same treatment meted out to them, would
make them start ripping off heads. What right did Ragnar have to shove my face in a
snow-bank? What universal set of laws allowed him to humiliate me like that for asking a
simple question?

"Oh my God," I whispered a second time, when my ability to speak returned. "Did you
really just rub my face in the snow for asking a question, Ragnar? Did that really just –"

I felt my head suddenly jerked back, then, and a sharp pain at the nape of my neck.
The Viking had a handful of my hair clutched tightly in his hand, and he was leaning in
very close to my face now, close enough so I could see the individual strands of dark
copper-colored stubble on his dimpled chin.

"Jarl," he whispered to me, and I could see from the look on his face that he was no
longer amused in any way by what was happening between us. "You will address me,
girl, as Jarl. Do you understand that you have no status here? That whoever you were
where you came from, you are no longer that person here, with us? You're not even a
thrall here! You're a prisoner, of no more value than a pig. Less value, I reckon, as we
can't make tasty hams out of you. Many a Jarl would have killed you for speaking to me
the way you just spoke to me in that –"

I made a sound then, halfway between a laugh – because it was all so absurd, and a
sob – because I could tell the Jarl wasn't joking, not even a little. My anger was aimed as
much at myself as it was at him and his manhandling. I needed to get home. I was in the
9th century. I should have been passive, acquiescent, waiting for my moment quietly and
without giving any of the Vikings a hint that I even wanted to leave.

"I'm sorry," I said, flicking my eyes down so as not to seem so confrontational. "I
didn't mean to offend you – or anyone. It's just that we don't drink ale for breakfast
where I'm from and I, um –"

"You should be grateful for the ale –"

"Yes, I'm sor –"

"Even as you apologize you speak over me!" Ragnar shouted, exasperated. "The water isn't always good here, girl. The ale saves us the upset bellies, sometimes worse. It's daytime ale, light and less prone to making a man sleepy or wayward. Do you think we spend our days drunk?"

"No," I shook my head vigorously. "No of course not. I – " I paused, because that actually was what I'd thought. I remembered some of my studies, though, as Ragnar told me the ale they drank in the daytime was weak. People in the past had drunk mildly alcoholic drinks over plain water, because the process of turning them mildly alcoholic tended to kill off the bugs that caused illness. I knew none of the Vikings would be able to tell me precisely why the ale was safer to drink than water, but they knew it was and that was all that mattered.

"I'm sorry," I repeated. "It was my mistake. I didn't understand. I'm sorry, Ragnar."

"Jarl. You must address me as Jarl, girl, it's as it is."

"It's as it is. I'd heard one of the men on our trek back to the Viking camp the day before use the odd phrasing. "Yes," I said softly. "Yes, Jarl."

As hard as I tried, though, it was impossible for me to keep the fact that I was deeply offended by what had just happened entirely out of my body language. When Jarl Ragnar loosened his hand on my hair and helped me to stand up straight again there was a stiffness in my body that I just couldn't force away.

"You're so angry, Emma," he commented, and I saw that his own anger seemed to be gone. Perhaps the freedom to shove the person who made him angry into a snowdrift helped with that? "I don't know that I've ever met a woman so willing to spit fire at such small things."

Small things?! I wanted to shout. No, I didn't want to shout. I wanted to suddenly develop the strength to drag his ass out of a roomful of people and chuck him into the snow. Then we'd see how 'small' he really thought those things were.

"Look at you," he laughed, touching my cheek – gently that time. "Your cheeks burn pink. Even as you speak softly, I see the truth in your face. You're beautiful."

It took me a few seconds to understand that Jarl Ragnar had, in fact, just thrown in a casual 'you're beautiful' at the end of his comment. It threw me off balance, too. That melting sensation came over me the way it does when someone – especially an attractive male someone – pays you a compliment. I didn't want to feel that way about a man who'd just rubbed my face in the snow.

"Oh," I said, and then coughed because I didn't know what else to say right away. "Um. Well –"

He laughed again and again there was a maddening softening somewhere inside me at the sound of it. "Willing to fight a Jarl in the snow, but not willing to hear herself called beautiful?" He smiled. "Perhaps you're no woman at all?"

"It's just odd," I said. "For you to call me that – what you just called me – after I thought you were going to rip my head off."
Ragnar removed a large, dark fur from around his shoulders, revealing another one directly beneath it. "Here," he said, wrapping it around me. "I brought this for you. Are you hungry, Emma? I can't offer much, not during this season, but we have some dried fish in the feasting hall, and some salted pork left over from the feast last night. Would you like some?"

I looked up – because everyone had to look up to Ragnar, the man was insanely tall – and tried to figure him out. Was he toying with me?

"What is it?" He asked as he began to lead me to the feasting hall. "You need to learn to take a gift when it's offered, girl."

He was right. I did need to learn how to do that. We weren't far from the tree, but I had no idea how many days it was going to be before I could get back to it – I needed to keep up my strength.

The feasting hall was a sturdier building than the one in which I'd spent the night, long and narrow and built of logs not more than 3 or 4 inches in diameter. It was gloomy inside, the way all the Viking dwellings were without electrical light, and lit with the chunky, slightly off-smelling candles that dripped a greasy substance onto the earth underneath them.

The Jarl sat me down at a long wooden table and signaled to a woman standing near the door. "Bring her what she wants," he said. "Bread, dried fish or pork. And ale," he grinned down at me. "The girl loves ale."

And with that, he left. Make no mistake, I was genuinely grateful for the opportunity not just to eat but to sit in a warm-ish building (a fire blazed in a stone fire-pit not ten feet away from me), but it wasn't until Jarl Ragnar left that I realized I'd been expecting him to eat with me.

"Aye," said the woman who had been instructed to bring me what I wanted. "He's a pretty one, isn't he? Don't look so sad, he never does this – not even with the Northwomen!"

"Is that true?" I asked, annoyed with myself for feeling so pleased.

The woman nodded. "It is. Our Jarl has taken a shine to a prisoner – it is the talk of the camp this morning! Now – do you want bread and butter, too?"

Pleased or not, I ate with one thing on my mind and that was getting back to 2017 and calling my friends and family, who by now would surely be convinced something terrible had happened. Jarl Ragnar was gorgeous, and it was impossible not to be taken in by the sense of natural authority he effortlessly projected, but flirtation could not be my priority. As I tentatively chewed on one of the dried fish the Viking woman brought me, I resolved to spend the rest of the day scouting the camp. I didn't know the exact route back to the tree, but I knew it was close – and I knew that the Vikings weren't just going to let me go. Which meant I had to learn a little about their routines and just how secure their encampment was.

The second I stepped outside of the feasting hall, though, I was met with a stout, barrel-chested man who, after I brushed past him, began to follow me closely. I picked up my pace – he matched it. I took a sudden turn down a path worn into the frozen grass – he took the same sudden turn.
I spun around then, eyebrows raised. "What?"
"Jarl Ragnar says I'm to watch the prisoner," he replied, and something about the slow pace at which the words left his mouth told me he might not be all there, "and make sure she doesn't run away. I am Kiarr."

I sighed. But I kept walking. So far, Kiarr had followed me. Perhaps I could still get a sense of the boundaries of the Viking settlement, and the paths that led away from it, with my new companion on my heels.

No such luck. The minute I left the tight arrangement of dwellings and headed away, Kiarr grabbed my wrist and stopped me. He wasn't going to negotiate, either, I could see as much on his face. His Jarl had given him a task to do and he was going to do it.
"Well what am I supposed to do?" I asked him. "Where am I supposed to go? I was only trying to go for a little walk after break—"
"No walking."
"OK," I agreed. "No walking. Fine. So, as I said, what am I supposed to do?"
Kiarr shrugged at that and held his ground. It didn't matter what I did, as long as it didn't involve stepping outside the boundaries of the settlement. If that was the case, I wanted to be somewhere close to a fire. Winter's cold fingers were already creeping underneath my tunic and caressing the back of my neck.

As it was obvious Kiarr wasn't going to be any help I just turned around and headed back to where we'd just come from, hoping to find the prisoner's sleeping quarters again, hopefully with a roaring fire inside. But none of the buildings had markings or signs of what their function was, so I mostly just wandered around, not even having to pretend I was lost, and kept my eyes and ears on full alert for information.

It was as passed one of the larger dwellings that I came to a sudden stop when I thought I heard a certain word being spoken inside it.
"Eirik."

Eirik. I knew that word. I knew that name. The Viking who fathered Paige's baby, the reason she came back to this place. I pretended to be examining my foot so I could lean in closer and try to hear more. And upon doing so I realized that the voice I could hear belonged to Jarl Ragnar.

That was all I needed to know. I strode to the leather flap that functioned as a door, pulled it back, and walked inside.
"Rag – uh, Jarl?"
It was not well lit inside the little dwelling, but I could see two figures, one sitting on a wooden chair, the other sprawled out on a pile of furs. The second figure was unmistakably Ragnar, as no one else was that size. As for the second, I had no idea. And both were looking at me.
"Kiarr!" The Jarl shouted and at once my companion entered, lowering his head in Ragnar's direction.
"Yes, Jarl?"
"Why is she in here? Did I ask you to let her into my private –"
Jarl Ragnar didn't even have to finish his sentence before Kiarr was dragging me away.
"Wait!" I screeched. "Just wait! Hold on! I know the person you're talking about. Eirik. I know Eirik!"

I didn't know Eirik. I didn't even know if they were talking about the same Eirik I had in mind. But if they were, then there was a chance, perhaps, for me to hear news of my friend.

"Stop," the Jarl commanded Kiarr, who immediately did just that. "What is it you say, Emma? You know Jarl Eirik? But you're not one of us, how is it that you know –"

"I know his, uh, his wife. Yes, his wife – Paige, she is a very close friend of mine. We –"

Ragnar held up one of his big, scarred hands, shutting me up, and turned to the man sitting next to him. "Did Jarl Eirik marry? Do we know who?"

I didn't actually know if Paige and Eirik were married, but I suspected that the Vikings would be confused by a term like 'baby daddy.' Marriage made it sound more serious, and even if they hadn't married, I needed to say whatever I could to increase the likelihood of hearing from – or maybe even seeing – Paige. I missed her – quite a bit more than I was willing to admit. I wanted to apologize more fully than I had done for disbelieving her when she first told me about Caistley. Also, I wanted her advice and maybe her help to get home. She knew this place and its people far better than I did.

The man sitting with Jarl Ragnar – smaller by quite a bit but with an air of seriousness about him – nodded. "At the end of the summer, I believe. She's given him a baby, a –"

"A son!" I broke in, desperate to prove I wasn't just making things up. "A boy, Paige had a boy. His name is Eirik, too."

Ragnar looked to the other man again and he nodded.

"Yes, I believe it was a son. And Eirik, same as his father. How is it that you know these things, girl?"

I saw something in Jarl Ragnar's body language when his companion addressed me casually. A slight blanching, maybe? Whatever it was, the other man saw it, too, because he immediately straightened his back and asked me again, more respectfully the second time.

"Please tell us how it is you know Jarl Eirik."

"This is Fiske," Ragnar told me, getting to his feet and leading me to a second chair. "One of my closest advisors. Now please, tell us of your relationship with Jarl Eirik."

"I – uh, well the truth is I don't know Jarl Eirik. It's his wife I know. Paige. We're from the same, um, place."

"I heard Jarl Eirik married a foreigner," Fiske weighed in. "Not one of the East Angles, either – a real foreigner. I seem to remember some talk of her being from the south, across the sea. Perhaps even the southeast."

"The southeast?" Ragnar replied, chuckling. "Across the sea to the southeast? It's impossible. But what you say about the south could be truth – this one is not an East Angle herself, nor a Northwoman. She hasn't been forthcoming on the point of her homeland."

Fiske glanced up at me again, and now my eyes had adjusted to the low light I could see the penetrating intelligence in his gaze. I was being appraised, judged to be
trustworthy – or not. "Are you and this Paige from the same place, then, is that it?" He asked quietly.

I knew where the questioning was going, but I had to give the answer I did, because I needed to see Paige. I needed Ragnar and his advisors to believe it was important. "Yes," I replied.

"And where is this place?"

"It's – it's quite far away," I stammered, before latching onto something Fiske had said. "The south, as you said. Across the sea. Yes, the south."

"Why do you sound like you're just repeating what I said a moment ago?" He shot back. He wasn't speaking loudly or aggressively, but I knew I was being interrogated all the same.

I coughed and swallowed, forcing the breath slowly out of my lungs, trying to gather myself. "I'm not repeating you," I responded a few seconds later. "I am from the south, across the sea. So is Paige."

Fiske stared at me, saying nothing. He stared at me for so long I started to fidget with discomfort. Eventually he seemed to have gleaned something about me that provided him with a measure of reassurance and he gave me a quick nod. "Well then, perhaps we'll be able to check your story soon, as Jarl Ragnar is to travel north to meet with Jarl Eirik."

I bit my lower lip and closed my eyes briefly, refusing to show how happy Fiske's words had just made me. I knew one thing, as the Vikings told me of their upcoming journey and I tried to react casually: if I couldn't find my way back to the tree before they left to go north, then I had to go with them. I had to see Paige.

"You're going to meet with them?" I asked, to make sure I wasn't misunderstanding something. "To meet with Eirik – and Paige?"

"Aye, girl," Ragnar started, but just as he was about to continue Fiske coughed pointedly.

"Jarl, perhaps it's best if we leave discussion of your plans until later?"

The man was small and pale next to Ragnar – his mousey-brown hair thin on his scalp and his hands and fingers delicate and fine, like a woman's. It's not that I thought Fiske hostile, not exactly. It's that I sensed an utter focus on the tasks at hand – a focus I did not quite sense from Ragnar himself – not when I was around, anyway.

"Yes," Ragnar responded, his voice a mix of both annoyed and slightly sheepish. "Of course. Kiarr, take the captive to the prisoner's dwelling. No, take her to the women at the cooking pits. She can help to prepare the food."

"Jarl!" I exclaimed, before Kiarr dragged me off. "Would it be alright if Kiarr took me to the beach first? Just for a little while – seeing the sea would help me to feel less frightened."

Something in me knew that Ragnar would react protectively if I told him I was scared. It wasn't a lie – I was scared. I was also intent on getting my bearings in the camp, figuring out what direction was north, south, east and west, and trying to pick which path led back to the tree.

Ragnar looked at me, as if about to allow the trip to the beach, but then at the last
second he glanced across the table towards Fiske.

"No," he replied a moment later. "You're a prisoner, Emma. You don't get to go for walks on the beach while the others toil. Take her to the cooking pits, Kiarr."

Damnit.

Petulantly, I tried to yank my arm away from Kiarr as he marched me away, but all that did was cause him to sink his fat fingers even deeper into my flesh.

"Ow!" I screeched. "Stop it! You're hurting me!"

But Kiarr didn't even seem to hear me. When we arrived at the cooking area – open to the winds but covered with a roof of branches and straw held up by wooden poles and thick enough to keep the weather out at the same time as it was thin enough to let the smoke dissipate – Kiarr shoved me towards a red-faced woman who seemed to be in charge. She wore a rough linen apron over her tunic, and it was smeared with filth.

"Jarl says she's to stay here," Kiarr told her and she sighed heavily, as if Kiarr had just told her she had fifteen minutes to train me in the art of diamond cutting.

"Doesn't the Jarl know that I'm busy?" The woman asked plaintively, looking to me as well as to Kiarr, as if I had something to do with the situation. "I've barely time to make sure these foolish girls don't burn everything to a cinder – now I have prisoners to tend to? Does the Jarl know how –"

Kiarr didn't respond with words. No, Kiarr simply raised one meaty fist above his head and the red-cheeked woman ducked away, understanding she would get no sympathy from him.

"Fine," she shrugged, still wearing a look of being immensely put-upon on her face. "You can prepare the sneeps. Here."

I found myself shoved towards a table piled high with a mound of short, pale root vegetables that looked a little like misshapen parsnips. And as I stood there staring, wondering what to do with them, lady red-face shoved a knife into my hand and opened her eyes wide at me, the way you do when someone is failing to understand something incredibly simple.

"Well, girl?!" She yelled, causing me to cringe away from the smell of her breath as she got closer to my face. "Are you dull? You understand how to prepare a sneep, do you not?"

"Yes," I replied stiffly, because I did not feel I'd done anything to deserve getting yelled at by some dirt-smeared Viking with terrible dental hygiene, even if I didn't actually have any idea how to prepare sneeps. "I do."

"Well get on with it then!" She barked, slapping me hard on the back.

I put my hands softly on the table in front of me, breathing as I had done earlier when I needed to keep my emotions under control – slowly in through the nose, and then out through the mouth - like I'd been taught in the meditation class one of my friends at Grand Northeastern had insisted I take with her.

The knife in my hand was blunt. So blunt I doubted it could have drawn blood with it even if I tried – so murdering my new boss was out of the question. As, it seemed, was peeling the odd, pallid things she'd referred to as sneeps. Nonetheless, I tried. I bent over the table, clutching a root in one hand, and trying to use the edge of the knife to peel the
skin off it, like one would with a carrot. The blade slid uselessly down the vegetable and I
tried again, pressing harder that time. And again and again, each time using more force,
until a thin shaving came off. It was going to take hours.

I looked around as I peeled, observing other young women in the cooking area, all
hard at work chopping enormous chunks of flesh into smaller pieces or stirring pots of
admittedly delicious-smelling liquids set over open fires or kneading dark lumps of dough
on wooden tables the surfaces of which were worn smooth with their labor.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING!"

I jumped about three feet into the air as the head cook screeched directly into my ear.

"Are you deaf, girl? Is that it? Is the Jarl sending deaf girls to me now?! Why must I –"

Angry, I snatched then knife back out of her hand, which caused all the other girls to
stop whatever it was they were doing and stare at me, waiting to see what my
punishment would be.

Not that I intended to let their boss lady deal out any kind of punishment. When she
reached to take the knife back from me once more I held it above her head – she was
quite a bit shorter than me – and she reacted by punching me in the stomach. I doubled
over, groaning, stupidly not having expected it.

"Fuh –" I wheezed, trying to get my breath back. "Fuh –, fuhhh –"

"Fuh, fuh, fuh," the cook giggled, mocking me and sending my rage level spiking.

"FUCK YOU!" I finally shouted, when the air returned to my lungs. "Fuck you! You
fucking –"

She went for me before I could finish, but I saw her coming and threw the useless
knife aside so I had both hands free to shove the cook to the ground and jump on her,
raining sloppy but somewhat effective blows down on her head. When she wrapped her
hands around my neck and began to squeeze the breath out of me, though, I stopped
hitting her and clawed at her fingers, digging my nails into her flesh until she screamed.
She didn't let go, though, and I could feel myself starting to lose consciousness.

Before the darkness at the periphery of my vision could take over, I suddenly found
myself lifted clean off the cook by the scruff of my wool tunic. And then the cook herself
was snatched up from the ground and a loud voice boomed through the cooking pit.

"WHAT IS GOING ON HERE? INGA! WHAT IS HAPPENING?!!"

Jarl Ragnar. He had both of us by the backs of our tunics, practically dangling in the
air. Inga, the crazy cooking-pit Viking, was still eyeballing me. I swung out wildly and
missed, and the Jarl gave me a single hard shake – hard enough to temporarily dampen
my anger at Inga.

I couldn't see his face but I could hear his heavy breathing and I could sense his – not
quite his anger, not just yet, but his disbelief.

"One of you best start explaining at once," he snapped. "Inga we've spoken of this!
I've already had to ask you to go easier on your girls. And I the Jarl! I who should be
dealing with the fitness of my warriors and the plans of my raids – you've forced me to
come to the cooking-pits too many times for it to be amusing any longer!"
Inga hung her head. I did not, because I didn't feel I'd done anything wrong. "You send me such useless girls," Inga burbled, managing to sound both obsequious and presumptuous at the same time. "And Jarl, I—"

"Enough!" He barked, suddenly letting go of Inga so she crumpled to the floor. "I swear it by Thor's fist, woman, if you speak so much as another word I'll whip you myself!"

The Jarl wasn't kidding, that much was clear. Even more so when he set me down roughly and caught me smiling.

'And YOU!' He growled. "I am starting to suspect you're as crazy as the old man in my home village, who spends his days laughing at the sky. What's got you chuckling like an old man then, Emma? And why are you giving my cook trouble?"

What could I say? That I was grinning helplessly because of his use of the phrase 'by Thor's fist'? No, I could not do that. Crazy or not, I was aware that it would be a bad idea to tell the Jarl I found his swearing hilarious. Besides, I was still incensed at Inga.

"I was doing exactly what she told me to do, Jarl," I replied, not quite managing to keep the indignant anger out of my tone. "She told me to prepare the, uh – the sneeps. So I was preparing sneeps. I was –"

"Preparing sneeps!" Inga cut in, yelling again. "Preparing sneeps! Girl you were doing something to those sneeps but it wasn't preparing them for the stew! She didn't chop a single one, Jarl, the whole time she –"

"I WAS PEELING THEM!" I shouted back, immediately regretting the volume of my response and quieting down. "I'm sorry to yell, Jarl, but what she says isn't true. I mean, I was peeling them, that part is true, but I don't see how –"

"You were?" The Jarl asked, cocking his head at me curiously like I'd just told him I was casting spells on the sneeps. "Peeling them, girl? Why? What is it to peel a sneep, anyway?"

"She was, Jarl!" Inga piped up. "Fair rubbing the knife down them like she was cleaning a deerskin. Dull she is, as dull as my husband."

I bit back a comment on the necessity of a man's stupidity if he was going to take on a horror like Inga for a wife and replied once again, that yes, I had been peeling the vegetables.

Inga knocked her fist against her skull, a gesture I actually recognized as the further accusation of 'dullness' that it was. "We cut sneeps, girl," she told me, speaking slowly the way one does to a child, and miming chopping with the side of her hand. "Chop chop, into pieces. You understand, now?"

"And you didn't notice that whole time?" I asked sarcastically. "Really, Inga? Are you sure you didn't just let me peel all those sneeps just so you'd have an excuse to yell at me? Because you seem to really enjoy yelling at –"

My tone was designed to piss her off, and it had. She snatched out for me, trying to grab my arm, and the Jarl shoved her away so hard she landed on her ass. Then he rolled his eyes, sighed, and grabbed me up by the tunic again, dragging me outside.

"Finish the vegetables," he called back to Inga. "Or I'll see to it you don't sit comfortably for a moon."
I considered struggling, I really did. But the truth was I was tired. The Jarl was the Jarl – even I with my idiotic modern ways, was beginning to understand that. If he wanted an explanation, he would ask. If not, he wouldn't. In the meantime, there was little to do but dangle from his grip, like a kitten in its mother's teeth.

The Jarl kept going, past his own roundhouse, past the feasting hall, out beyond the boundary of the camp, currently marked on that side with a deep, wide ditch that he leapt over with ease, even with me hanging off one arm.

"Where are we –" I started, when we got to the top of the beach and he kept going, down to water's edge. Before I could finish he'd freed me from his grip and I turned, eying him, waiting to see what he was going to do to me.

And what Jarl Ragnar did was fix me with a stern look that lasted all of five seconds before he suddenly burst into a fit of helpless laughter. He looked even more handsome than usual when he laughed.

I waited for him to finish. And when he did, and I thought I might ask what was so funny, he started up again.

"The look –" he giggled, stopping to crack up again. "The look on her – on her – ha ha ha – did you see the look on Inga's face!? Did you see it? She wasn't –"

He broke off again, exploding into another gale of laughter, his whole body shaking with it.

Ragnar gasped and took a deep breath, in the midst of his laughing fit. "Gods, Emma, was she angry! None of the cooking-pit girls will so much as squeak at Inga, she's got them as scared as mice. And you – you –" he chuckled helplessly, only managing to get it under control about 30 seconds later – "she wasn't expecting you, was she?"

And as so often happens when you're witness to another person lost in mirth, I began to crack a small smile, too. Inga had looked pretty shocked. Still, it was difficult for me to find the situation quite as funny as Ragnar seemed to.

"You let her do that?" I asked, when his giggles seemed to die down. "You let her treat the other girls like that?"

Ragnar was bent over, hands on his knees, trying to get himself together. But he directed a suddenly skeptical eye in my direction when I questioned him about Inga's treatment of her workers.

"My concern is whether or not my people have good food on the feasting table, Emma. And they do. So there is no reason for me to interfere with how things are done in the cooking pits. A Jarl who is seen to be concerning himself too often with the domestic tasks will lose the respect of his clan."

I could have kept questioning him – indeed, the part of me that is never satisfied with pat answers dearly wanted to. But I needed to stay as far away from the Viking Jarl's bad side as possible.

"You don't like my answer," he commented, having seen the look on my face. "Do the warriors prepare the food where you come from, Emma? Do the women fight in battle? Is that how it is down south and east, across the sea?"

"The warriors don't prepare the food, you're right," I replied. "But we don't have so many warriors down south and east, and there are a lot of men who cook meals for their
families. And yes, some of the women do fight in battle. It's—"

Ragnar scoffed loudly. "Some advice for you, girl. If you're going to lie, make your lies believable. No land that makes its women into its warriors will survive."

He wasn't wrong, not from his perspective. Combat in Ragnar's world was still of the hand-to-hand variety. Size and strength were the deciding factors in who won a battle. And I knew there was no point in trying to explain advanced weapons to him, or how women were just as capable of pressing buttons and pulling triggers as men. So I just nodded, not in total agreement but as a signal that I was conceding the point.

"You want to carry a sword, girl, is that it? Here, try mine."

And with that, Jarl Ragnar removed the sword that he wore strapped around his waist at all times. It looked large in his hands – longer and broader than I would have expected – but it looked absurd next to me. He balanced the tip in the sand and leaned the hilt towards me and as soon as I had wrapped my hands around it I knew it was going to be too big for me to wield with any grace.

"No," I said, pushing it back. "It's OK. I don't need to—"

"Pick it up," Ragnar insisted. "Go on."

Challenged directly, my pride got the better of me. I gripped the hilt with one hand and tried to lift the sword. It was incredibly heavy – much heavier than I would have guessed – and it barely moved. I used a second hand and managed to get it off the ground by a foot or two.

"There," I said, looking Ragnar in the eye. "I can—"

"Swing it," he cut in, grinning. "You can't, can you?"

He was right. I couldn't. "We don't use swords where I come from," I told him as he took it back and refastened it at his waist.

"Well we do," he replied amiably. "And you can barely lift one, let alone swing it at an enemy. Don't look so offended, Emma – did you expect anything else? I'm bigger than you, and stronger by far. Did you really think you would be able to wield a Jarl's sword?"

I looked out to sea, at the dark gray waves and the whitecaps in the distance, unable to think of what to say.

"The beach," Ragnar said, joining me in looking out across the water. "You said you wanted to come to the beach and here you are. Perhaps I am not as terrible a monster as you would have it?"

He took the fur that he carried draped over one arm, then, and I saw that it was the one he had given me earlier. It must have fallen off in the tussle with Inga. Ragnar wrapped it around my shoulders, pulling the leather ties tight at the front with surprising tenderness.

"You miss your home," he said quietly, after making sure the fur was secured. "Look, I can see it there on your face. You think of home."

The Jarl was eerily accurate in his mind-reading. I was thinking of home. Specifically, I was thinking of England, where, confusingly, I was standing at that exact moment. But it was not 9th century England I thought of. It was my England, the country where I knew my parents were worrying about me, wondering where I was.

"You're right," I said, as the high wind from the sea blew my hair off my face. "I am."
"Why did you leave it?"

As I began to reply, the Jarl led me a few paces back to where the driftwood piled up at the top of the beach, and sat me down on a log bleached pale by the elements.

"I'm not sure," I replied. "Well, maybe that's not true. I was having a difficult time. I didn't really mean to leave."

And just like that, as the words 'I didn't really mean to leave' left my mouth, my eyes welled up with unexpected tears. I tried to blink them away but they were too voluminous and instead of disappearing they just spilled down my cheeks, freezing before they could reach the corners of my mouth.

Instead of offering me comforting words, or pretending he understood what I was talking about, Ragnar turned my face towards him and looked right at me for a few seconds. I searched his eyes, looking for a meaning behind what he was doing – was it another question? Another challenge? It didn't seem to be either of those things. What it seemed to be was a kind of seeing – an acknowledgement. And when the seconds had passed he used the softer linen of his shirt, pulled out from under one heavy shearling sleeve, to wipe my cheeks. It was one of the most careful gestures I have ever experienced from another human being, so perfectly attentive that I was unable, in my strange modern embarrassment at honest emotion, to deal with it. I turned away as Ragnar dried my face, and then I changed the subject.

"Is it true that you're going to see Eirik?" I asked. "He's north of here, with Paige?"

The Jarl gave me a harder look, then, and narrowed his eyes. I hoped he didn't blame me for looking away a moment before. "Fiske thinks I shouldn't talk to you about any of this," he said. "I wonder – is he right?"

"Do you think I'm a spy?" I asked, laughing at the idea. "Me, a weak little woman – as you so thoroughly pointed out with the sword? How could I –"

"Ah!" Ragnar stopped me. "Lifting a sword is one thing. Your arms are not as strong as mine, Emma, but your mind may be stronger by half. It's a stupid man who assumes a woman his lesser because she can't best him in combat. And Fiske is right, you seem reluctant to give details of where it is you come from."

"I just want to see my friend!" I replied. "I miss her. There are things I need to discuss with her that I cannot discuss with anyone else. Besides, she's married to Jarl Eirik and is the mother of his child. Do you think she has a nefarious plot, too?"

"I've never met her," Ragnar said. "So I can't speak to her plots. Do you feel that, Emma? Do you feel the way the wind changes?"

I lifted my head up, then, and focused my senses outwards. The Viking was right, the wind had picked up.

"Look," he said, pointing out to sea, "look at the tops of the waves – do you see the way the foam blows backwards at the peak?"

I followed the direction of his finger with my gaze and saw what he was describing, the mist blowing back even as the waves drove forward. "Does it mean something?"

"It means bad weather," Ragnar replied, concerned. "A storm – it will be here before night falls. We have food to last us, but we didn't expect a winter like this in the Kingdom"
of the East Angles. I'll have the fire-pits stocked high with firewood and the roundhouses
lashed to the ground-posts, but it feels bad. Do you feel it right now, in the air?"

Once again I tried to divine the information it seemed Ragnar was receiving from the
wind much more clearly than I was.

"I don't know," I told him. "I don't think so. It just feels really... windy."

"Come," he said, standing and reaching for my hand. "You distract me, Emma –
perhaps Fiske is right about you?"

As we began to make our way back into the camp I tried to ask the Jarl what he
meant by that, but the wind was blowing too hard, I don't think he heard me.
By sundown, the camp was as prepared as it was going to be for a windy, snowy night – or nights, depending on how long the weather lasted. Bad weather is never welcome, but it was particularly unwelcome at that time. My people weren’t in the land of the East Angles for pigs and pretty women alone. We had been, in times past – the Angles were poorly defended, and their lands relatively rich in resources – but there had been talk amongst the great Jarls that perhaps it would soon be time to move beyond raids to conquest. That’s why I was where I was, with my warriors and the people needed to support us. It’s why Jarl Eirik was where he was, and why others still were on their way or already setting up camps. It was time to talk, to plan our next moves, to make decisions. Until we killed or subdued the King of the East Angles, our rough camps were no more than children’s games.

Not that there was too much time to think of the future when the winds picked up and the snow became like grit against any exposed flesh. I instructed the people to hunker down, to bring enough firewood for three nights into their roundhouses, to block the spaces in their dwellings with snow, ice, straw, animal dung, leaves – anything that could be found. I brought the warriors, along with my personal advisors, servants, and the most useful of the thralls into the feasting hall, where the three fire-pits (one at each end and one in the center) burned high and bright.

It is my task to keep up not only my own spirits but those of my people. To this end, and as the winter howled outside, I began a round of storytelling, recollections from the warriors of victories over our enemies, tales of men’s foolishness love and lust, and games of chance. Darker evening ale was drunk and thick chunks of dried bread with salted butter that had been softened in great wooden bowls placed next to the fire were passed around. It seemed to work – the warriors and the people in the hall laughed and ate and gave each other love-eyes over the tops of their horn cups. The only one who seemed ill at ease was myself.

Arva came to me as I stood by one of the fires, watching the flames dance as if in a stupor.

"You must drink, Jarl," she said to me, handing me a cup of ale. "The people are safe from the storm in the feasting hall and in their roundhouses, why do you stand by the fire with the worried face of an old woman?"
I laughed heartily at the 'old woman' comment – Arva did like to poke at me, although always with affection and respect.

"You read things into me that are not there," I told her, taking a swig of the dark ale. "I stand by the fire to warm myself, Arva – nothing more."

Arva was small, even for a woman. When I looked down, all I saw was the top of her blonde head. The height difference made her hard to read sometimes, when seeing her face would have been useful.

"Come join us then, Jarl. The hall is warm, the people wish to hear a story from you. Unless there is something other than the fire that keeps you from us?"

Arva was hinting at something. She knew it, and I knew it. I was also pretty sure I knew what it was. But the prisoner's longhouse had been tied down securely, their fire built up – although not as high as the fires in the hall – and they had their woolen tunics and the warmth from each other's bodies. Emma – the one I won't make an effort to pretend wasn't highest on my mind – had the fur I had given her.

But Arva was right. I was worrying, and worrying is always a waste of life. I turned back towards the table where warriors, women, children, advisors and favored thralls all sat together, their eyes shining with the feeling of being safe and protected from the cold wind that shrieked outside.

"Will you tell us a story, Jarl?" A small child asked, clutching at my hand as I walked by.

The girl's mother admonished her at once, pulling her hand away and warning her against speaking so forwardly to the Jarl.

But it was a special night, an unusual night, and so I knelt down to the child's level and looked into her dark eyes. "What kind of story would you like, little one? The story of the time your Jarl conquered a Lord's estate with only a single man killed? Or the story of the time he got caught in a cow's field when he was a boy, and the cows chased him around and around until he needed to be rescued by his mother?"

"The cows!" The little girl laughed. "Tell us about the cows chasing you, Jarl!!"

And so I told them the story of the cows chasing me, only slightly embellished for effect, and peals of laughter rang out in the feasting hall. And after I told the children that they should never show fear to a cow, lest the animal assume it has the superior position, other people told stories of their own, until the hour and the ale did its work and they began to drift off, curled up close to each other around the fire-pits.

Only one person did not sleep. Only one of our lot sat in front of the fire again, listening to the wind as if it whispered portents of the future.

"Sleep," Arva said, coming up silently behind me. She had been sleeping a moment before and her voice was slow with it. "Everyone else is asleep, Jarl. Even the prisoners will be dreaming now, in their longhouse. They're warm, we brought them a mountain of firewood. She is warm."

I looked up sharply, but then couldn't be bothered to deny what Arva implied – that my concern was for Emma in particular, rather than anything – or anyone – else. She knew what was on my mind as well as I did.

"The people sleep," Arva continued, "and now I will sleep again, too. But I can bring
you a girl, if you wish it. One of the prettier thralls, perhaps? Borgir's daughters have had their eyes on you all night – do you prefer the blonde or the red-haired of the two?"

Borgir was one of my men, older but still able enough to fight. I'd come to know his daughters when I was almost out of my second ten years, before I became Jarl. They had provided amusement of the kind pretty young women provide a warrior, but both had been more trouble than they were worth, following me around the village endlessly and weeping childish tears when I chose not to marry either of them. It was Borgir's wife who had insisted on her – and her daughters' – presence in one of the small, early settlements in the Kingdom of the East Angles. I would have preferred they stayed back but Borgir himself would have taken it as an insult, and so I suffered their presence.

"I'd sooner have you protect me from those two as bring them to me," I answered Arva quietly. "Go to sleep, there's no need for you to be up with me."

"Are you sure, Jarl?"

I nodded and Arva retreated, leaving me alone by the fire once again. As the thralls were all asleep, I built it up again myself when it started to wane, and watched as the flames bent under the drafts that came whistling in through the cracks in the log walls.

Did I imagine it or did the wind grow even more fearsome? The wooden doors were flimsy, not built to last, and as the gale knocked them against each other a small drift of snow built up on the ground just inside the hall. A knot in my stomach tore at me, not allowing me to sleep. If there was snow where I was, next to the fire, how much was there in the prisoner's dwelling? Was that fierce little foreigner cold? Did the other captives turn her away when she tried to lie close to them for warmth, knowing her to be my object?

I stood up eventually, accepting that there would be no sleep for me until I knew Emma was warm and unafraid. The hall was a bedchamber then, warm bodies piled happily together, the sounds of snoring rumbling through the air. I slipped out the doors, latching them shut behind me, and ducked my head into the cold blast that greeted me outside. All around the camp drifts of snow had built up on the northwestern sides of the structures, some almost reaching the roofs. The wind picked its way beneath my dressings and I hurried my steps to the longhouse, not eager to spend any more time outside than necessary.

The moment I stepped inside I saw it – the fire that had almost died away entirely, the lack of any more firewood, and the shivering knots of humans wrapped around each other, trying to keep warm. It wasn't supposed to be so, I had instructed the captives to be given enough wood to last the night. In the morning, I would have Fiske deal with whoever was responsible. As it was, I made my way back to the feasting hall and brought a huge armful of wood back to the longhouse, a third of which I lay on the glowing orange embers. The flames grew again and I used the flickering light they cast to look around.

Sure enough, there she was, on the outside of the circle of people that lay around the fire-pit. A flash of anger raced through my chest at the thought of anyone pushing her away, of punishing her for drawing my attention. I went to her and bent down, leaning in close.

There was no response. And when I ungloved my hand to touch her cheek, I knew why. Her skin was as cold almost as ice, her breathing so slow as to be almost imperceptible.

"No," I said, loud enough to cause a few heads to lift. "No! Emma!"

I picked her up, then, and threw her cold body over my shoulder before racing back to the feasting hall. Inside, I carried her to the fire and knelt in front of it, holding her on my lap. The fur, where it was near her mouth, was stiff with the frost from her breath. And still, she was not awake.

Forget asking Fiske to do it – I was going to find the person responsible for this myself, and see to it that they never made such a mistake again.

I untied the leather ties of the fur and peeled it off, pressing my fingers into the chilly, pale flesh of Emma's neck. Her heartbeat sang there under her skin, and a wave of relief washed over me. But it was not just relief. It was a sudden sense of Emma herself – her mind, her life, both imbued with a preciousness I did not recall having felt for a woman before. Nothing could be allowed to happen to her, no harm could be allowed to come to her. I took her face in one hand and bent close, whispering her name.

"Wake up, Emma. Wake up my little cold one, wake up. Emma, Emma, Emma."

I hadn't even felt her come back to herself when I pulled away briefly and saw that her eyes, dark with – with what? fear? – stared up into mine.

She shook, which was a welcome sign – when the cold is so much a person starts stops shivering, that's when the time to worry is. So I welcomed her shiverings, and her impossibly perfect teeth clattering against each other.

"The captives were to be given enough firewood," I whispered, guiltier than I'd ever felt in my life, and somehow desperate for her forgiveness. "It was not my intention that you freeze! In the morning I will –"

Emma was trying to speak but her lips were slow with the chill. "Th-thank you," she said. "Thank you, Jarl."

Her gratefulness only made me feel guiltier.

"The prisoners were supposed to have been given enough firewood to –"

"I know," Emma nodded, because I was repeating myself. "I know."

Why did it matter so much to me that one foreign girl didn't think I was the kind of man to let his prisoners starve or freeze? It had never mattered before, even as I tried to be the kind of Jarl my father brought me up to be – stern and even at times harsh, but fair with it, loving and merciful where it was warranted. And now, all of a sudden on a stormy night in the feasting hall, it did matter.

Not wanting to continue talking, when the last thing Emma needed was more words, I pulled her arms out from under her tunic and pressed her hands between mine, rubbing them very gently because I know how painful a rough touch on frostbitten flesh is.

I held her hands up to the fire, still rubbing, and she watched me for a little while, before turning to look me in the eye.

"Why do you look at me in that way?" I asked, when she said nothing.

"You're being so gentle," she smiled. "I didn't think. I didn't –"
Before Emma, I had only heard other men tell of the effect a woman's smile – or the particular way she speaks his name, or reaches for his hand when she fears danger – can have. Before Emma, I thought they spoke of lust when they told me of these things. Lust was there – so present I found myself having to shift my body to find some comfort – but it was infused now with something new, something I didn't remember ever having felt for any of those girls I tumbled in the furs with. Again the sense of preciousness was there, as if Emma, filled with her own kind of womanly fire, was somehow as fragile and vulnerable as a lamb.

"You looked at me like that on the beach today," she whispered, slightly lifting one of her hands and giving the distinct impression of wanting to touch my face before letting it fall limp at her side again. "That look, the one you've got in your eyes right now. What does it mean?"

I looked down at her, safe in my arms, her soft, full lips parted ever so slightly. The feeling that comes from being with a woman was there, existing almost paradoxically alongside the more noble, protective ones. I wanted Emma to be warm, comfortable. But that mouth of hers asked for a reaction, and the building, insistent need to invade grew thick in my loins. It was a hunger like a starving man has for food, the ache to bend down, push my tongue into her mouth, my hands up under her dressings, to keep going, to take.

Still, I had enough sense to know she must have known what my 'look' meant. Emma was no naive cowherd's daughter. I bent down closer, close enough to feel her soft breath on my face – the sweetest kind of torment – and brushed my lips lightly against her cheek. She moved when I did that, arching her neck, turning her cheek up to me, asking for more.

"You don't have to ask what my look meant, Emma," I chided her gently, again bending down – to her neck this time – but refusing to give her what I know she wanted.

"I –" she said, intending to throw another verbal challenge my way and then finding her own words dissolving into a sigh. Her fingers found their way to the back of my neck, and then buried themselves in my hair, and she pulled me in closer, tighter. It was too much, a platter piled high with the juiciest berries offered to a man whose belly aches with hunger. I opened my mouth against Emma's neck and kissed her. I kissed her until her body arched up to mine and her limbs fell open, inviting me, begging me.

When my mouth found hers and she opened her lips for my tongue, so I could taste how badly she needed me, the force of desire was so strong it was as if I couldn't breathe. I found the bottom of her tunic and desperately pushed the layers of dressings aside, seeking her warm flesh.

Emma made a sound when my hand closed around one of her soft breasts. And even as I find it difficult to recall the sound, the reaction it drew out of me stays in my mind.

"Voss, Emma," I whispered sharply, pulling her up to a sitting position so I could hurriedly rid her of the wool and linens that thwarted me to the point almost of rage.

And then she was naked – as soft and flawless as a fawn – on my lap, and two hands were no longer enough. I grasped her hip and pulled her closer, groaning when she pushed her body down against me, right where I needed it. Like the starving man
presented with berries, I gorged myself. And Emma offered herself up for my consumption, stroking my cheek and pulling my head into her when I took her nipples into my mouth, one after the other until they stood up stiff and glistening in the firelight.

"Jarl," she gasped, and listening to her try to keep her voice down just made me wilder. "Ragnar. Oh my –"

There was no time for slowness. Neither of us had it in us to take any more time. When Emma reached for my leathers, unable to free the part of me she needed, I helped her out.

"Is this –" she panted, stopping momentarily at the place where my body most needed her, right over my throbbing, aching manhood. "Ragnar – we're – everyone else is –"

"I'm the Jarl," I reminded her, out of breath and almost out of my mind with need. "The people understand their Jarl is a man, with the needs of a man. They – Emma, they –"

Before I could finish, she lowered herself, reaching her hand down between our bodies to guide me into her soft, warm slickness until my breath stopped in my throat and I near bit my tongue in half with the urge to let go.

Emma's expression changed as we joined – I watched it melt into a look of animal indulgence, her lips pulling away from her upper teeth and her breath coming in quick, short bursts. She began to move against me at once, working her body up and down, closing her eyes with pleasure every time I filled her again, until my eyes near rolled in my head with the effort of holding myself back.

I leaned back a little, so I could fully take her in with my eyes when I felt the first sweet, agonizing little tightenings around me. She bit her lips trying to be quiet and then, almost at the moment of release, actually clapped her hand over her own mouth.

And then she was mine. I held her face to my neck, so my flesh could absorb her little shrieks of ecstasy, and with my other hand I locked her body down against mine and let the feeling of her softness pulsing around me pull the same bliss back out of me.

"Emma," I said, hearing the low, rough tone in my own voice. "Emma –"

My fingers dug deeper into her flesh as the wave crested and crashed over me. With both hands I held Emma down, groaning loud and rocking myself up, deeper and deeper, as the white emptiness of pure sensation exploded through me.

I kept her there until I was finished. It felt like forever that time, the well of myself never quite empty, the pleasure playing out like a rock skipped endlessly across the sea. And when I was sated we looked at each other and I saw in her eyes that she was, in that moment, truly mine.

We slept immediately, barely having the will to build the fire again before collapsing in each other's arms beside it, wrapped haphazardly in furs and wool and linen.
In the morning, which came too soon for my liking, I woke as everyone else did and sat on a chair next to the fire watching my people blink themselves awake and cock their heads to the side, listening for the strength of the wind as Emma slept curled on a fur next to the fire.

Arva walked by me on her way to check the situation outside, her eyes glazed with sleep.

"I see you changed your mind about company, Jarl," she said, smiling.
I smiled back. "Just helping to keep the captives warm, Arva."

"And one in particular, I see," she replied, leaning in. "I can't quite see her face but I think my guess would be correct. I see from your face that I needn't ask if she's pleased you. Shall we meet soon?"

I always met with Arva and Fiske in the mornings, often as we ate breakfast and drank ale. But that morning, I was not yet ready to leave the cocoon of warmth in the feasting hall. "Have Kiarr bring my breakfast to my roundhouse," I told her. "I'll take my ale and fish with this one, and I'll see you and Fiske afterwards."

Arva grinned. "As you wish it, Jarl."

Emma stirred as Arva left, roused by our conversation. I looked down, feeling a sensation almost like my heart collapsing inwards on itself as she rubbed her eyes and I watched her expression go from one of confusion to recognition to, when she looked up at me, happy contentment.

"No mead has ever had that effect," I told her gently.

"What do you mean?" She asked, reaching up for me.

I took her hand and held it close to my chest. "Even after a night by the fire your hands are cold, girl. And what I mean about the mead is that it feels that way to watch you wake up – like I'm loosened by honey mead or dark ale – but the effect is actually stronger watching you."

We stayed where we were for a moment, gazing into each other's eyes. But the day beckoned and as much as I wanted to spend it entirely in my roundhouse with my juicy Emma-berry, I knew it was impossible. "Come," I told her, moving to help her to her feet. "We can take breakfast in my –"

She shrieked and crouched back down to the floor, grabbing dressings and furs to hold
cover herself.

"Is it a draft?" I asked, confused – the fires in the feasting hall really did have the place quite warm.

But Emma shook her head quickly and widened her eyes at me like I was missing something obvious. "There are people in here!" She whispered. "I – I don't have any clothes on! They'll see me."

Emma was right, there were still a few people in the feasting hall, mostly the teenage sons and daughters of some of the higher, older warriors, wasting time in the warmth before they had to go back to their daily tasks. I didn't see why my foreign girl wore such a horrified look on her face, though.

"Aye, there are people. What is it you –" and then I stopped because I saw what was happening. Emma was embarrassed, self-conscious. "You wish to conceal your nakedness?" I asked, surprised and not a little baffled. "Why? Do you think the people see the way you curl up in my arms – and the way you gaze at me this morning – and don't guess what we did as they slept? What half of them did themselves during the night?"

I reached for her hand again, trying to pull her to her feet but she pulled herself away and threw her linen under-dress on over her head quickly, bending her body so no one would be able to see much before the dress fell over it.

"Of all the people," I said as we dressed in earnest, before heading to my roundhouse for breakfast, "who I could expect to feel shame at their bodies, you are the very last."

"Well it looks like you're all a bunch of hippies here," Emma replied, "but it's not like that where I come from. Where I come from you would actually be in a lot of trouble for having no clothes on in front of –"

"Hippies?" I asked, unfamiliar with the word. "Is this your word for the people of the north?"

She laughed heartily at that and took my hand as we walked, allowing me to move her behind my body slightly so I could protect her from the still-strong winds. "No, Ragnar," she giggled. "Hippies and Northmen are definitely not the same thing."

I wasn't sure what Emma found so worthy of mirth but I enjoyed hearing it all the same. We took breakfast – dried fish, dark bread and butter and ale – in my roundhouse and at one point she caught me watching her perhaps a little too intently.

"What?" She asked. "Why are you watching me eat? I hate it when people watch me eat!"

"Who else watches you eat?" I asked. "Give me their names so I can have them killed! I watch you eat because something odd has come over me, Emma. I believe I might be getting more satisfaction from watching you eat your bread, than I do from eating my own."

She looked at me pointedly, as if trying to tell if I was toying with her or not, and then swallowed another mouthful of ale. The stirring under my leathers, which had been there since we woke up, quickened at the sight of her lips on the edge of the cup.

"Don't tell Fiske that," Emma warned, having discerned Fiske's natural suspicion levels from the short interaction with him the previous day.
"Oh I don't think I'll tell Fiske," I said, reaching out and sliding one hand under her dressings, up over the smooth muscle of her calf and then bending it under her thigh at the knee, not stopping. "But something tells me he knows it already."

I exhaled heavily at the sensation of Emma's wetness on my fingers, and slipped two of them into her. It was just what I needed after the urgency of the previous night – the time to take it so slowly she would lose herself in desire, and plead with me to give her what she needed.

"Jarl Ragnar?"

Kiarr. He stood at the entrance to my roundhouse with the leather door-flap pulled aside, allowing the cold air to rush in. I also saw him noticing that my hand was under Emma's dressings. He didn't leave, though – Kiarr had been told to attend to me after my breakfast, and that's what he was going to do.

"Voss, Kiarr!" I swore, reluctantly taking my hand away from the girl whose eyes were already shining with the urges I was going to satisfy. "Can't you see I'm busy? Come back later, when –"

"When, Jarl? When shall I come back?" He asked, unmoved. I got to my feet, ready to shove him back outside myself, when another appeared behind him. Fiske.

"We must speak, Jarl. A messenger from Jarl Eirik, another entreaty to meet with you – and this one more urgent than the last."

And then, turning the situation from one which I truly felt might lead to me launching a few of my own people straight into the sea into one in which I couldn't help but laugh helplessly and shake my head, a third person appeared, one of the young female thralls. She pushed her way in between Fiske and Kiarr and popped out between them, holding her head respectfully low.

"What is it?" I sighed, seeing that I wasn't going to get the time to quench the heat of my lust in the lake of Emma's body that morning.

"Inga wonders if you will send the prisoner again, Jarl. She says she needs her to help with the vegetables for the –"

"You tell Inga that the next time she sends a thrall to ask me a favor, and after disgracing herself in front of me yesterday, she's going to get thrown into the stew-pot herself!" I barked, sending the thrall fleeing back to the cooking-pits.

"I don't need you now, Kiarr," I told the servant, not quite keeping the exasperation out of my voice. "Go away, I'll call for you when I need you. And you, Fiske, come in. Where is Arva?"

"She'll be with us soon, Jarl," Fiske replied, coming into the roundhouse and glancing, very briefly, in Emma's direction. Fiske knew not to question me, or to behave in a disrespectful manner around me, but he was a man of rules and routines and even in that fleeting glance I could see his displeasure.

"She has business with Jarl Eirik," I told him, not wanting to send Emma away, even if it was just back to the feasting hall to spend the day in warmth before I could see her again. "She can be here."

Soon Arva arrived and before the sun peeped out of the racing clouds at the highest point of the day, a plan had been forged. We were to head north the next morning –
myself and near half of the warriors. Families and advisors would stay behind, and the second half of the warriors to hold the camp, should any of the East Angles get foolish ideas in their heads. Emma from the southeast, across the sea, would not be staying behind. The truth is I would have brought her along anyway, even if anyone had objected, but I can't say I didn't try to impress upon Fiske, Arva and my men that the foreign girl with the strange words and the skin like fresh spring milk was, in some vague but real way, necessary to me.
After the night spent in the feasting hall in Jarl Ragnar's strong arms, I barely left his side. It wasn't something he appeared eager to hide, either, and he seemed if anything slightly confused by my timidity in 'going public.' He didn't know that where I came from, a single night spent together was virtually meaningless, and that it certainly didn't indicate some kind of relationship had begun. Even after the Jarl seemed to take me on as, in some important way, his, I anticipated the moment he would go cold, find a new girl, develop a sudden need to engage in activities that didn't involve me.

It didn't happen. I didn't have to beg and plead to be allowed to join Ragnar and his men on their trip north, because he told me he wanted me next to him.

"Why do you have that look in your eyes?" He asked, as we stood in the bow of a Viking ship as it cut through the dark sea on its way north. "You've had it for a day now, ever since last morning when we woke together in the feasting hall."

"What look?" I asked, smiling because it seemed impossible not to smile around Ragnar, especially as he cuddled me against his huge, fur-cloaked body to protect me from the cold.

"Like you're surprised," he replied, leaning in close to kiss my cheeks. "You have it now, girl, still. What surprises you so much?"

I looked east towards the land as it raced past us. It was eerie – the trees and grasses, the beach formations so familiar and yet, without the markers of civilization – buildings, boats, cars, towns – so alien. I did not quite want to tell Ragnar why I had such a surprised look on my face, because it was – well, it was embarrassing. I wasn't raised to feel guilt or shame over my sexual encounters – and I didn't. But I also wasn't ever truly told about the emotional consequences of living in a place and time where some men felt no compunction about sleeping with you and never calling again. It had happened twice since I started at Grand Northeastern, and both times I told myself to chalk it up to inexperience, that it was just something that happened to a lot of young women. Both times I ignored my own sadness, and the poignant little deflation in my heart when the hoped-for text message asking to see me again never came. I felt ashamed, like a stronger person wouldn't have let it get to them. But I did feel it, and being with Ragnar was only underlining how sweet it was to be with someone who seemed just as interested in being with me, even if I did have my clothes on.
"I don't know," I lied, pushing my uncomfortable thoughts away. "Maybe I'm just happy?"

I was happy. So happy I felt guilty every time I thought of home, and of my family – which was often. What right did I have to be enjoying myself with Jarl Ragnar while the people who cared about me suffered? I'm trying to get back to them, I told myself. Paige will know what to do. She'll know how to get back to the tree.

We sailed through the day and into the cold, clear night when the stars shone over our heads as bright and multitudinous as I'd ever seen them. The men took turns sailing the ship in groups of four and the rest of us, Jarl Ragnar and I included, huddled under furs on the open deck, trying to sleep. It wasn't even too cold, as long as you didn't roll away from your companions in your sleep, as a few of the men did, before waking to find the sea mist frozen white into their eyebrows and beards.

Almost a full day after our leaving, after sailing with what Ragnar described as a 'godswind' at our backs, we arrived in a bay much like the one we'd left behind. On the beach, two guards dressed in the furs and leathers of the Vikings stood waiting for us. A shiver of hope ran through my belly – was this place Paige's home? Was I about to see my friend again?

Our party brought casks of ale and slabs of cured pork as gifts, all of which took some time to unload. Halfway through the task, I looked up to the beach and saw a new man standing with his guards, waiting for us. I couldn't quite make out his face yet but he had to be Jarl Eirik. Imposingly built – like Ragnar – and dressed in finer clothing than the two young warriors, he made his way down to the water's edge to help carry the goods we had for him.

I'd noticed that same instinct – the willingness to get involved in the day-to-day running of camp and the direct communication with those lower down on the ladder of the hierarchy – in Ragnar. You'd never catch a modern CEO having dinner with his security guards the way Ragnar ate with his men, but apart from a marked dislike for Inga in the cooking pits, he seemed entirely at ease with his people, regardless of their rank. Was it simply Viking custom that their leaders felt a duty to maintain a certain level of closeness to the lives and work of those below them? If it was, I admired it greatly.

Jarl Ragnar's party – including myself – stood back a few feet when it came time for the Jarls to greet each other. They regarded each other with a kind of respectful solemnity for a few moments, and then they broke into smiles and hugged each other tightly.

"Look at us," Jarl Eirik commented, "across the sea like our fathers, when it seems only yesterday we spent the days of our boyhood together, as green as saplings. I miss those days, old friend. I miss you."

Ragnar hugged him again, and clapped him on the back. "Aye, Eirik. It turns out our mothers were right – the days pass as swift as arrows, and responsibilities crowd around us. I hear you have a son, now? I'll be glad to meet the boy, and tell him stories of who his father was before he was a great Jarl."

"You honor me, friend. Yes, I have a son, and –"

Eirik broke off at that point, because as he was speaking he'd been looking around at
Ragnar's people – and his eyes had just alighted on me. Ragnar noticed it at once and turned to look at me, and then back at his friend.

"Have you become traditional in your old age?" He asked, laughing. "Do you think it unseemly to bring a woman not my wife to meet another –"

"No," Eirik shook his head, starting towards me across the sand with a look of great interest on his face. "No, it's not that. It's – Ragnar, who is this woman?"

People were interested now, as they – and I – took note of Jarl Eirik's strange reaction to me. I felt the attention focusing on me as he approached, and I hoped I had not angered him in some way.

"She is my companion, Eirik," Ragnar replied, pulling me to his side. There was a whiff of tension in the air then, one of two strong, young bucks meeting in a forest. At the moment all was curiosity, but everyone involved – including the bucks themselves – felt the possibility of a clash. Ragnar's body, presenting as at-ease, felt stiff next to me. He was ready to move, if necessary – ready to fight. "Is there something about her that offends you? She, too, seeks an old friend –"

But Eirik wasn't listening, he was staring. Right at me.

"Where are you from?" He asked, in a voice that did not sound hostile. "I'm sorry, girl, but you remind me very much of someone –"

"Of your wife?" I asked, picking up on who it was Eirik was referring to and once again feeling a surging hope in my heart. If I reminded him of his wife, his wife was almost certainly Paige. No one else in this place, not even the highest ranking Vikings – had the blemish-free bodies or straight teeth of a modern person. No one except Paige Renner.

"Yes," he replied, looking confused. "Yes, of my wife."

He walked around me, examining me with his eyes but not touching me. "I ask again, girl, where are you –"

"Southeast. Across the sea. Another land." Ragnar spoke. "She does not name the land, or the people, but anyone can see she speaks the truth."

Eirik chuckled at that comment, diffusing what was left of the undercurrent of tension swirling around us. "Ah yes. These cagey foreign women – my wife too is inexplicably reluctant to speak in any precise way of her homeland. Paige is –"

Jarl Eirik stopped short at that point because, upon hearing the name of my friend spoken aloud and receiving confirmation that she was in fact at that very camp, I promptly burst into tears. Both Jarls turned to me, their eyebrows raised in surprise, as I gulped and hand-waved and did everything I could to stop bawling.

"What is it?" Ragnar asked, bending close so only I could hear his words. "What's wrong, Emma? What upsets you?"

"Nothing!" I sniveled, laughing through my tears before getting them under control. "I'm not upset – I'm happy. Jarl Eirik, Paige is my friend. I have missed her very much, and I need to speak to her. Until this moment I didn't know for certain she was here."

"Strange," Eirik said. "Paige insisted I would never meet anyone from her homeland. She was certain of it. It's not yet four moons since her return to me and here you are. She is in the camp with our son, you will see her at the feast of welcome tonight."

But the feast of welcome wasn't going to cut it. I needed to see Paige alone. Without
anyone else around – including our respective Vikings.

"With respect, Jarl Eirik," I started, wary of how rude I had come across to Ragnar in the recent past, "I would like to meet with Paige before the feast of –"

"Emma," Ragnar cut me off, and there was a note of disapproval in his voice. Even with my attempt to show respect it seemed I had overstepped my bounds again. "You'll meet with your friend when her husband sees fit to allow it. We are Jarl Eirik's guests and –"

"No," I replied, as the familiar, instinctive fight response to injustice welled up inside me. "I'll meet with her when she wants to meet with me. Why do you – why does anyone – decide when I should –"

One of Jarl Ragnar's guards stepped towards us at that moment, clearly intending to either smack me or drag me away for my impertinence. And in almost perfect symmetry, both Jarls blocked his way at the same time.

"Back, idiot!" Ragnar barked.

Jarl Eirik simply threw his head back and guffawed. "Oh she's definitely one of Paige's people," he chuckled, as Ragnar still looked wary about how his friend would react to me. "As it is, girl, I don't wish to be murdered by foreign women in my sleep – you shall see your friend before the feast."

We were led, then, after it was established that I wasn't going to be left behind or whipped by one of the Viking warriors, into the unfamiliar encampment. I saw right away, even from the outside, that it was much more established than Jarl Ragnar's. Surrounded on two and probably three sides by extensive ramparts and tall, sturdy palisades, even the dwellings looked more solid. There were no animal skin roundhouses in this camp, no. Here, they were built of wood – even the smaller ones.

There were a lot more people, too, many more women and children. Even as the cold kept them inside by their fires I heard the sounds of babies fussing, children playing, adults deep in conversation.

"You've done well," Ragnar commented as he and Eirik walked on ahead of everyone, their arms slung affectionately around each other's shoulders. "A winter storm nearly blew my camp away not two nights ago – many of our houses are still rough, deerskin on wooden frames."

I liked seeing the two Jarls together. You could feel the sense of respect, even love, between the two men. They laughed as they spoke, and listened to each other intently. It gave me a feeling of unexpected satisfaction to see them together.

As I was hanging back behind the two Jarls, I caught sight of a stout woman rushing officiously towards them. Neither had seen her yet and my belly tensed, awaiting whatever punishment would be hers for approaching in such an aggressive hurry.

A few of Jarl Ragnar's men spotted her at the last minute, and I watched as their hands moved to their left hips, seeking the hilts of their swords. But no one in Jarl Eirik's party reacted – including Eirik himself.

"What is it, Hildy?" He asked the woman when she stood in front of him, craning her neck up to look him in the eye.

"It's your wife, Jarl," she replied. "She wishes to see you in the roundhouse before the
"Oh I bet she does," Eirik laughed. "Reassure her I'll be to see her soon, Hildy. Does she need more furs? Bring them to her if she does."

Paige. They were speaking of Paige. A low thrum of anticipation set itself up in my stomach, the way it does when some longed-for thing is on the very cusp of happening. I was surprised to find that I was nervous, too. Paige was at home in this place, this world, in a way that I definitely wasn't. She'd been visiting since childhood. Would she think less of me when she saw how awkward I was with the Vikings – whom she probably thought of now as her people?

When Jarl Eirik introduced me to the woman – Hildy – and instructed her to take me to see Paige, I glanced back at Ragnar, to see what he thought of it. He gave me a nod and a smile, and I turned, reassured, to follow Hildy.

The snow was not so deep at this camp, as it had been trodden by many more pairs of feet into the ground, and the mid-day sun peeked through the clouds. Presently we arrived at a roundhouse, although it was larger and built more finely than the others, and set on the high point of the camp.

"Lady!" Hildy called into the dwelling, having ignored me entirely. "Paige! Do you sleep? A girl is here to see you."

The Vikings liked that word 'girl' – almost all of them used it in reference to me. It did not slip past my notice that Paige was 'lady.' Perhaps I needed to marry one of them to earn the title?

And then, suddenly and plainly, my friend's voice came back in return.

"A girl? What girl? Did you tell my husband that I need to see him before the –" "I did, lady. He says he'll be here. As for this girl, you'd best not ask me about her, for I've never seen her before in my life. Jarl Eirik said to bring her to see you, she's arrived with Jarl Ragnar's party."

"Baby Eirik sleeps," came Paige's voice, and I smiled at the mild irritation in her tone. I remembered that tone. Mostly from shared chores in our flat, when she would become impatient with my inability to cook pasta to the right point of tenderness, or my tendency to leave the bathroom counter piled high with various creams and cosmetics. How odd it seemed to be standing where I was standing and thinking of our days at Grand Northeastern – it seemed a million miles away. I suppose, given that geography was not all that separated the one from the other, that in a way it was. "Can this wait, Hildy? You say the Jarl instructed you to bring her to me?"

Paige sounded like Paige. Unmistakably, it was her. But there was a new strength in her voice, a new assurance. What I was hearing was the voice of a woman, no longer that of an uncertain college girl.

In the end, I couldn't stand it any longer.

"Paige!" I called, stepping around Hildy – who immediately strong-armed me back behind her with an audible scoff. "Paige it's me!"

I suspect Hildy might have had something more to say to me had there not been an immediate commotion from inside the roundhouse, and the squawk of a rudely awakened baby. Almost at once the leather flap was pulled back and there she was, Paige, as
clearly herself as ever even as she was dressed in the clothing of the Vikings. As soon as she laid eyes on me she turned them away again, before laughing and speaking as if to herself.

"No," she said. "It can't be. It can't –"

"It is," I told her. "It is, Paige. I have so much to talk to you about – I have so much to –"

At once, my friend threw her arms around me and I did the same and we stood there, rocking each other back and forth, laughing and crying at the same time.

She drew back minutes later, squeezing my shoulders as if she still couldn't quite believe I was actually standing there in front of her. "How did you – oh my God, Emma – how did you get here? How did you – you traveled with Jarl Ragnar?! How did you meet – when did you –?"

"Perhaps it's best you have this conversation beside the fire?" Hildy suggested, in a much more respectful voice than she had used when she addressed me. "It's too cold to stand out here in the –"

"Yes," Paige responded. "Yes, of – of course! I'm sorry! I'm too shocked to think straight. Emma, come in, come in. Oh I hope this isn't a dream. If I wake up and you're not here, I'm going to be so sad."

Inside the roundhouse it was spacious and warm, with a fire-pit as big as the ones in the feasting hall in the very center. Furs covered almost every surface, and already I could see that they were of better quality than any I had seen so far, barring the ones Jarl Ragnar wore. And on one of those furs, bundled in soft, pliable leather, was baby Eirik. No longer a newborn, I could now clearly see the features of his father in his face. Paige scooped him up as he fussed, and pulled her finely-made woolen tunic to the side to breastfeed him. And then she looked at me, and I looked back at her.

"How is this possible?" She asked. "Emma, how did you get here? I mean, I know how you got here, but – why? I hope nothing terrible has happened – oh no! Has something terrible –"

I shook my head. "No, nothing terrible has happened. I mean, not if you mean 'terrible' like nuclear war or something like that. I can't say that it's been that great for me, though. I actually worried I might be angry at you if I saw you again. As it is now, though, I don't. All I feel is relief, and happiness to see you so –"

"Angry?" Paige asked, confused – and funny enough that was the first hint of anything less than joy I had felt since seeing her again. "At me? Why would you –"

"After everything you went through," I replied, and what I said came out a lot more bluntly than I meant it to. "Did you really think it would be easy for me when you disappeared again? Did you think the media would just magically leave me alone?"

My friend looked at me for a few seconds, and I watched her eyes darken with sadness. "No," she said quietly. "I didn't think that. I admit I didn't think very much about it until it was too late, too. Until I was here and you were back there and there was nothing I could do. I was too self-absorbed. Has it been awful, Emma? I'm so sorry. I'm so –" her voice became a whisper and then disappeared altogether as a tear slipped down one of her cheeks.
I didn't want that. I didn't need or want Paige's guilt. "No," I said, reaching out and taking one of her hands in mine. "No, Paige. Please don't cry. Do you think I came here to make you cry?"

But she wouldn't look at me. Instead she kept her eyes on her baby – fat and healthy in her arms, much bigger than I remembered him – and on the fire.

"I did wonder," she said a few seconds later. When I got back here and found Eirik again, when I had time to think. I wondered if anyone would think you knew more about me disappearing again than you would say."

"They didn't just wonder!" I blurted out, apologetic even as I felt the strong urge to share just how difficult it had been for me since she'd left. "They thought I had something to do with it! The whole bloody internet thinks I did it – that I killed you or sold you to aliens or – I don't know, used your baby in a satanic ritual or something! I had to talk to the FBI, Paige. The FBI!"

She looked up when I said that, her expression one of horror. "You – what, Em? The FBI? Why did you –"

"Because they think someone took you! Just like they did the first time! And this time they think someone took your baby, too, and your dad. Who did you think they were going to focus on if not your best friend and the last person to see you alive?! I've had death threats, you know! My parents had to hire a security guard to follow me around! Someone spit on me!"

I stopped yelling then, because it was too upsetting and my voice was breaking. I lowered my face into my hands, crying for the things people had said to me – the things they'd done to me.

"And I couldn't tell anyone!" I wept. "Only you! And you were gone, Paige! You left me to deal with all of this all by my –"

At that very moment, Jarl Eirik entered the roundhouse. He took one look at our faces, seeing that neither of us was smiling or happy, and rushed to Paige's side.

"What is this woman saying to you, my love?" He asked her, pulling her into his protective embrace. "Shall I have her sent –"

"No!" Paige sobbed, handing her sleeping child to his father. "No, Eirik! I – no, please don't send her away. She's upset because of me – because of something I did. If you want to do anything please tell Hildy to have the westerly roundhouse prepared for my friend. I want her fed the best food, Eirik – the best! I don't want your men or Hildy treating her like dirt because she's –"

"The westerly roundhouse? Paige, the westerly roundhouse is where Jarl Ragnar will stay. Your friend can stay in one of the –"

"No! Eirik, listen to me!" Paige insisted, and loudly enough to cause the baby to stir. "It must be the one I said, it –"

I coughed a little. "I, uh – well, there's no need for you two to fight about this, because if Jarl Ragnar is staying in the – what did you call it? The westerly roundhouse? Then that's probably where I'll be staying."

"What?" Paige asked, as I smiled sheepishly through my tear-blurred eyes. "You're – Emma, you're sleeping with Jarl Ragnar? What the hell? I thought you – I mean, how did
"I didn't mean to be so harsh with you," I said quickly. "What I just said, I mean. It's just – it's been building up for awhile, you know? I had no one to talk to, no one I could tell the truth, and you were gone and it –"

Paige held her arms out, then, and I fell into them. We held each other tightly as her husband backed off and looked on, baffled.

"I know," my friend said softly. "Of all the people who knows what it feels like to have a secret that can't be shared, I know. And you know I know."

"And I'm sorry for not believing you," I replied, my eyes welling up with fresh tears as I remembered how I'd treated Paige when she first told me she'd been time-traveling since she was a child. I hadn't believed a word of it, and to think of it then, from the perspective of my own experience, made my heart ache with regret. "I never even apologized properly for that!"

Paige pulled away a little, so we could look each other in the eye. "Listen," she said, squeezing my hands in her own. "You're here. You're here now. Eirik, I need the afternoon. Have Gudry or Anja take baby Eirik and leave me alone with my friend. You can see we have much to talk about."

Jarl Eirik, who had been standing back watching us with a look in his eye that I had interpreted as the standard male 'oh, look, the women are crying and being emotional again' reaction, impressed me by taking Paige's words with real seriousness.

"Yes," he replied, bending from his great height to kiss his wife's cheek. "I'll have Hildy seat her with us tonight, at the high table. Any friend of yours, Paige, is a friend of myself and my – our – people. Call for Hildy if you need anything, alright my love?"

Paige nodded and then Eirik turned to me.

"And you," he said to me. "Know that you are welcome here. I see that my wife holds you in esteem. That means I hold you in esteem. Anything you need, anything that can be done to sooth your sadness, I will see to it that it's done."

"Thank you," I responded quietly, because I wasn't sure what else to say and I was too awed by being treated with such respect by Jarl Eirik.

After he was gone I just sat there for a little while, taking it all in. It hadn't even been six months since I saw Paige, and I could see that she was still Paige, still the girl who basically raised herself. But she was different now, too – very different, and in such a short time. It was a lot to take in.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" She asked when she saw my expression.

"It's just so strange seeing you," I replied. "Here, I mean. You still look and sound like yourself, you still have the same mannerisms, all of the things that make you, you. But you're so – I don't know the right word – you seem so grown up now. And not just because you have a husband and a baby. Wait – is he your husband now?"

Paige nodded. "Yes. We got married soon after I returned."

"And the way he talks to you!" I continued. "The way he looks at you! I swear if I wasn't so mind-blown by this entire situation I would be dying of jealousy right now."

I meant the things I said to Paige. It's not like I'd made a habit of dating men who didn't respect me, but there was something profoundly adult about the vibe between
Paige and her husband, a vibe I knew I hadn't experienced before with a man. The men I knew back at Grand Northeastern were hardly that much younger than Eirik – but they seemed so different that they might almost have been a different species.

Maybe it wasn't just the men who we different? Maybe the women were, too? Paige had a child now, and a husband. And she lived in a place where I suspected that the knife-edge between survival and any number of catastrophes – starvation, conquest by a hostile force, disease – was sharper, and much closer than it was to anyone living in the western world in 2017.

My friend and I talked through the afternoon, filling each other in on our respective situations.

"So you're sleeping with him?" She asked bluntly at one point when I tried to finesse my way through describing the night in the longhouse with Jarl Ragnar.

I laughed. "Um. Yes. It doesn't mean I'm not going home – I have to go home, you understand that better than anyone. But he's not a brute, you know. He's actually –"

"Emma," Paige cut in, "you don't have to defend yourself to me! I know these people now – I know how they are. Plus, you know – he's hot as hell."

"Who?" I asked, even though I knew damn well who she was talking about.

"Ragnar, who else?"

"Don't call him that to his face," I grinned. "He gets tetchy."

"Jarl Ragnar, I mean," Paige corrected herself. "Yeah, it's not too difficult to see why you may have ended up in his bed."

It wasn't all gossip that afternoon, though. We sprinkled those lighter moments, the ones that almost let both of us believe that if we closed our eyes we could be back in the kitchen of our flat, gossiping about hot guys before heading to class, throughout the conversation. But make no mistake, the conversation was serious.

"No one knows?" Paige asked, when I emphasized, for what must have been the tenth time, that I not only needed to get home – I needed to get home soon. "You didn't tell anyone about this place? You didn't tell anyone you were coming here?"

"Who would I tell?" I asked, shrugging. "I thought about telling my lawyer – I mean, not seriously – but yeah, no one would have believed me. And I know that because I didn't even believe my best friend!"

Paige gave my hand a squeeze to let me know she understood how sorry I was about that as we pondered what to do.

"Well you're going to be here for a few weeks," she said. "Maybe a little less? But maybe I could come south with you when you go? Eirik might allow it if –"

"A few weeks?!" I burst in. "What? I thought this was just a meeting! I thought we would be going south again by tomorrow! Why would it be weeks?"

"You don't know Vikings," Paige replied, unsmiling because she knew I was right when I told her my parents and sister and the rest of my family and friends would be completely out of their minds with panic and worry. "There's no such thing as a brief social visit with these people. The raids have gone easily and well, we're stuffed to the rafters with food and goods, and Eirik intends for Ragnar and his people to stay here for Yule."
"Yule? What, like Christmas? That's not a 'few weeks' – it's just over a week until Christmas, right?"

Baby Eirik, sitting on his mother's lap, reached out for a lock of my hair that hung close to his little hand. Paige handed him to me and gave me a knowing smile. "They don't do things by a calendar here, Em. This is my first Yule too, the first year since setting up this camp that Eirik has seen fit to hold it in full. So I can't even tell you what it really means. What I can say is that from the way Eirik talks about it, it isn't just one day. It starts with one day – the darkest day, he says, but then there's days of 'quiet' – don't even ask me what that means because I don't know – and then, after the quiet, there are days of feasting and drinking. He says there are many rituals as well."

"The darkest day?" I asked. "So, like, the solstice? The 21st? That has to be less than a week away. Then a couple of days of quiet and then Christmas dinner? Is that how it'll go? I still don't see how that's going to take weeks."

Paige and I watched as her son gummed one of my fingers. "I don't know," she said, obviously troubled. "I wish I knew, because I understand how important it is to get you home as soon as possible, but you have to know, Emma, that trying to go back on your own is a bad idea. It's freezing outside, you would die the first night. And if you didn't die the first night, you'd run into outlaws or the King's men – and you really don't want to do either of those things. Please don't think you'll be able to –"

"Oh I'm not an idiot," I told her. "Paige, seriously? You think I'd try to get south again, on foot, in this weather? No. If it's two weeks, it's two weeks. If it's three, it's three. I'll wait, because the only thing I care about is getting home in one piece, so my parents can –" I broke off as my lower lip wobbled and then finished in a whisper. "I just mean I won't try to go anywhere by myself. I won't do anything without telling you about it first, OK? All I care about is getting home."

"I know," she said, coming to me and wrapping her arms around me once again. "I know, Em. And we'll get you home. It just – it takes a certain kind of patience to get anything done here, that's all."
When evening fell, Hildy came to Paige's roundhouse, where I'd been left alone while Paige took care of some things – to lead me away and told me that before the feast, I would be bathed, and that I could take my bath with Paige, if I liked. Since it was bitterly cold and, as far as I knew, the Vikings didn't have access to electricity or hot water tanks, I assumed she meant some kind of hellish dip in a half-frozen stream.

"No," I told her, standing outside and refusing to move as the wind whipped my hair against my face. "It's fine, I don't need a bath."

I moved to go back in, desperate to feel the fire-warmth again, and found myself blocked. Hildy had her arm outstretched in front of me. I looked at her, at first assuming she'd made some kind of mistake – but she didn't drop her arm. Nor did she speak.

"What is it?" I asked, confused. What did this woman want?

"I'll send for you soon," she replied firmly. "So you can be bathed before –"

"No," I said, slowing my speech because I believed maybe Hildy was having trouble understanding me. "I don't need to be bathed. Thank you for offering but –"

Hildy laughed heartily, cutting me off. "Oh I'm not offering, girl," she said, drawing herself up and eyeballing me. "You'll be seated at the high table, with my Jarl. As such, you will be bathed beforehand."

"No," I said, for the third time, and in a much less friendly tone. "I don't know what part of 'I don't want a bath' you don't understand, but I – Hildy, I don't want a bath. Now if you'll please –" I tried to shove her out of the way, because the tip of my nose was getting numb in the cold.

Hildy held herself in place. She was quite a bit shorter than me, and quite a bit stronger than I'd imagined. I shoved her again, harder, and she slide to the side.

"Paige won't allow it either!" She yelled, when I finally managed to get past her. "I'll send her to fetch you, then! I'll send your friend to fetch you for your bath!"

"Do what you want, you crazy old bat," I muttered, before making my way to the westerly roundhouse following the path Paige had told me led right up to it. I walked inside and found Jarl Ragnar seated in front of a fire, shirtless from the waist up and effortlessly magnificent.

"What is it?" He asked, seeing that I was annoyed. "Don't give these people trouble, Emma. We're their guests, Jarl Eirik feasts us tonight."
"I –" I started, before stopping to gather my thoughts because, as I said – Ragnar was shirtless. He was sprawled across a kind of wide wooden bench, bigger than a single bed and piled high with soft furs – and I was pretty sure I'd never seen a sexier sight in my life. "I – uh, Ragnar, um, I – sorry, what am I talking about? Oh, yeah. I don't want a bath. I was just telling Eirik's assistant that I –"

"Eirik's what?" Ragnar responded, irritated but smiling, because he'd definitely noticed my reaction to his state of half-undress. "And it's Jarl Eirik to you, Emma. Don't make me regret bringing you here. If the woman wants you bathed, you'll be bathed."

I almost snapped at him at that point but luckily the humor got me before the anger could. "What am I?" I asked, laughing. "A baby? I need to be 'bathed?' Does the Great Jarl Eirik find his powers weakening if an unclean woman is seated too close to him during a feast?"

Ragnar got to his feet so quickly I thought he might be about to strike me and crouched low, to defend myself. It was his turn to laugh. "What are you going to do?" He chuckled, pulling me in against his warm, strong chest. "Are you going to fight me, girl? You're stronger than most of the women, it's true, but I don't think you'd have much luck in combat with a Jarl. As for being bathed – will the fire-hearted one allow her Jarl to advise her?"

The fire-hearted one. I liked that. I liked it so much I decided to keep how much I liked it from Jarl Ragnar – although something told me he might have guessed it anyway. I also liked the way he referred to himself not as a Jarl, but as her Jarl. My Jarl. And I definitely wasn't admitting that – even, at the time, to myself.

"You can advise me if you want," I told him, turning my head up so I could rest my chin on his chest and look into his glacial blue eyes as the firelight danced within them. "But only on matters of combat and – I don't know – sailing and conquering and things like that. You wouldn't take my advice on how to take an estate, would you? Or how to swordfight? So why should I take yours on women's cleanliness?"

Ragnar looked back down at me, half smiling, half stern. "You're a troublesome girl, aren't you?" He asked, bending his head to kiss my mouth slowly and only pausing to speak again when I was breathless with the sudden need he conjured to life deep in my belly. "A very troublesome girl. Keep it up and I might see fit to punish you. As it is, I am not advising you on women's things, gods no. I advise you only on Viking ways. It is our way that a woman bathes before being seated with a Jarl, at his feasting table. Also before taking to his bed, although I admit I have not been as fastidious on these matters as I could have been."

I hovered there, in the liminal state between wanting to keep talking to Ragnar and wanting the talking to stop immediately. It made the blood rush hot and fast in my veins to be so close to him. He was so big, so masculine, as solid and unbending as a hundred year old oak tree. It made me feel drunk, it made my limbs slow and my mouth hungry for his kisses to be held so tightly against him as I was.

I laughed – not a loud, mocking laugh but a softer, gentler one. Still, a laugh. "You're right," I told him. "You were not fastidious on that point. So why must we be fastidious now?"
He opened his mouth to respond, and just before he did I slipped one of my hands under his leathers and found him, thick and hard against his thigh. "Emma," he started, but his words turned to a heavy sigh and his eyes closed and I felt something soften inside me.

I was raised in the modern world, by educated, cosmopolitan parents. I knew where babies came from, and didn't find any part of it funny or embarrassing, by the time I was 8 years old. My mother took me to the doctor to get a prescription for birth control pills when I was 16, after I told her my first serious boyfriend and I were going to have sex. What I'm saying is that up until I met Jarl Ragnar, I considered myself a fully, confidently sexual human being.

So why did it feel like such a shock to experience the reactions in my own body when he touched me? Even he noticed it. When I shivered as he loosened the ties of my tunic before pulling it off over my head, and then bent down to take one of my nipples into his mouth, he saw the look of surprise on my face.

"What is it, girl?" He asked, kissing his way to the other nipple and applying the same exquisite technique of soft suction and a firm tongue to it. "Why do you look as if I had just transformed into a wolf in front of your eyes?"

A wolf. It was a fitting animal to choose. I felt like prey in front of Jarl Ragnar, as vulnerable and sensitized as a doe in a forest clearing. I didn't recall ever having felt that way with ex-boyfriends. Sex with them was light, fun, as casual an amusement as an afternoon nature walk – it never made me feel the way Ragnar was making me feel, with the lust seeming to emanate from his pores, entrancing me, making me his.

"I –" I said, trying to think of something to say. But there was nothing – or there were no words for it, anyway. All I was doing that at that moment was feeling, and there was no room for anything else within me.

"You have a virgin's look in your eye, Emma," he whispered, pushing his tongue into my mouth and kissing my deeply, until my thighs ached for the feeling of him between them. "Have you never been with a man who knew what it was to take a woman before?"

To 'take' a woman. I might have objected to that term, had I been anything other than literally weak-kneed and slick-thighed with desire. Men didn't take women, that's not what sex was. Sex was a mutually pleasurable activity between two adults. That's what I'd been told, even if part of me had always wondered if maybe, maybe, there wasn't more to it than that.

And standing there in Jarl Ragnar's roundhouse, with his hand slipping up, up my inner thigh, and then pressing, holding itself against me in a gesture that could not have been any more obviously about ownership, I suddenly knew with absolute certainty that everything I'd been told was wrong. Or, not in any way close to the whole story. I didn't balk to see the aggression in his gaze when I turned my face up to him and he took it in his hands and plunged his tongue into my mouth again, hard.

"Voss," he swore – I knew it was a swear because of how – and when – he said it. I cried out when he pushed one finger into me, and then a second, and then took them back out to hold up in the light.
"You're as wet as a doe's flanks after the rain," he told me, his voice thick and deep, before pulling me down onto the bed of linens and furs that had been laid out for us.

I straddled him as we undressed each other, peeling off layers of wool, leather, fur, pushing them aside in our frenzy to feel each other's bare skin. And then I was naked on top of him and he was looking up at me, consuming me with his eyes as his hands grasped greedily at my flesh. He wasn't inside me, not yet. His cock was between my legs, but it wasn't inside. I pushed my hips forward, sliding my wetness up the length of him, and he dug his fingers into my hip so hard it hurt. I kept going, too, and my mouth fell open as what little control I still had seeped away.

It quickly became too much. Ragnar lifted me up, just far enough to wrap his hand around himself and push the head between my lips, groaning loudly as he did so.

"Emma," he said, settling himself against me. "Emma, Emma..."

I slid down on him, then – all the way, gasping and throwing my head back and clenching my hands into fists. It stung a little, at the moment when I was most full, but the sting was sweet. He was sweet. I only forced my eyes open so I could see him, so I could watch the expressions on his face as I worked myself up and down, as we worked each other up into a desperate frenzy of need.

"You're beautiful," he told me, thrusting his hips up harder, quicker. "You're going to finish me, girl. Voss, ohhh..."

I didn't have to guess what 'finish' meant, either. It didn't take the work with Ragnar that I was used to it taking. I didn't need to slip a surreptitious hand down between my own legs to make sure I didn't get left behind. Seeing him get closer – feeling him get closer – it was like being carried along on tide, pushed nearer and nearer to the beach where you know the wave will crash over your head and send you tumbling.

"Oh, God," I panted, as I moved against him quicker and harder. "Oh my God. Oh!"

"Yes," he moaned, pushing his upper body up off the furs when he saw how close I was and pulling my mouth down to his again. "Yes, Emma. I'm going to give you – Emma, I'm –" he broke off when he felt the first trembling contractions of my orgasm around him.

I met his eyes one last time, taking the urging in them and falling easily, simply over the edge. There was never a moment of worry or hesitation. Ragnar led me to that searing, oceanic bliss and then he held me as I dove in. I think I actually screamed at the peak of it, perfectly full of him.

"Emma," he growled, before I was even finished, and I knew what it meant. He pulled me down against him and buried his face in my neck, baring his teeth against my skin. "Emma," he moaned again, his voice catching in his throat as he held me down and didn't let me back up, filling me, giving me what he needed to give me.

I let him hold me so tight I couldn't breathe when he came – and I would have let him do a lot more than that. I think I might have let him do anything. I'd never experienced such power – such unadulterated maleness – as Ragnar before. When the tension left our bodies and he pulled me down beside him on the furs, curling himself around me, I felt almost stupefied by what had just happened.

"Is that what it takes to quiet you?" He asked a couple of minutes later, rolling over
on his back and completely relaxed. "You just need a man to finish you, is that it?"

I wanted to banter. I wanted to giggle and join in. But my brain – my soul – still felt all scrambled up. I knew I wouldn't have been able to string a sentence together if I tried. So I didn't try and Ragnar studied me with his eyes, a look I almost wanted to turn away from, worried that I might become instantly addicted.

"I'll have you again before the feast if you keep staring at me that way," he whispered, "as winsome as a spring lamb, even as my essence fills your belly."

We were allowed to lie there, in the little cocoon of warmth and our own spent bodies that we had created, only for another minute or two. Even before a woman's voice came from outside, demanding that I attend my 'bath' the reality that, out there, people were searching for me, worrying about me, imagining I was hurt or worse, had begun to reassert itself. Ragnar himself noticed, pulling back at one point to look at me with great interest.

"You worry again," he said, tucking a piece of hair behind one of my ears. "I see its return in your eyes, Emma."

Before I even had a chance to dodge the subject, Hildy returned.

"Why do you fight it?" Ragnar asked. "A hot bath? If I had a hot bath on offer, girl, I would not be fighting it. You seem a small child, fighting against eating its supper. You know the little one is hungry, but something in the infant mind once it begins to walk cannot abide anything it interprets as an order. Even if the order is to do something pleasurable! If someone ordered me to eat berries and spring cream, or to lie back in a hot bath in the middle of a freezing winter and relax as others attended to me, I would not fight them. But it is as it is, I suppose. You are a woman, and women are like small children in so many –"

Jarl Ragnar stopped talking and burst out laughing then, because he'd seen the look on my face, seen that his teasing had riled me. I reached out and slapped his shoulder and he ducked out of reach. "I meant it, woman! All except the last part – it's not women who need to wear the blame for your stubbornness. It's just you."

"Is she ready?!" Hildy's voice came from outside, and even as she was speaking to a visiting Jarl her tone was definitely not as respectful as it could have been. Ragnar heard it, too, and raised his eyebrows in surprise at me, grinning.

"Well you'd best hurry," he whispered. "She sounds even scarier than Inga!"

In the end, I followed Hildy – who even managed to walk as if she were in a state of permanent annoyance – along a frozen path to another roundhouse. Inside, fires burned in two pits and the interior was more brightly lit than usual, the walls and surfaces almost covered with the tallow candles the Vikings used everywhere. Three wooden tubs, deeper and shorter than regular bathtubs, sat in a row. Paige was asleep in one of those tubs, and in the one next to her was a slightly older woman with thin hair and, I saw when she smiled at me, a few missing teeth.

Attending to them were two other women, Vikings in dress and look. When Hildy shoved me through the leather doorway and slapped it shut behind me with an audible sigh of irritation it was one of these two that looked up and smiled.

"You're Paige's friend," she said, gesturing to the third tub. "Hildy told us to expect
you. Take off your dressings and we'll prepare the water."

At that point, Paige woke up and, when she saw me, smiled widely. "Oh good, you're here. Hildy said you were giving her trouble, but Hildy thinks everything on earth was created for the sole purpose of giving her trouble. Get undressed and hop in – it's wonderful."

As I stood, not getting undressed, the two attendants moved heated rocks from the middle of one of the fires and plunged them into the third tub, where they hissed and sizzled and made the water around them boil furiously.

"Is that – uh, is that safe?" I asked. "Won't those rocks burn me?"

"Oh you just don't touch them at first," Paige replied airily. "Anja will push them to the bottom end, just give it a few minutes for them to cool and then you can use them to warm your feet on."

For a brief moment, I wondered if Paige was playing some kind of prank on me. "What?" I asked. "Are you serious? How don't those rocks burn their way through the wood, anyway?"

"They're placed on other, smaller rocks to prevent it," one of the attendants answered, gesturing to the tub I was to bathe in. I peered in and saw the smaller, flatter rocks arranged at one end. OK. That was taken care of. I just had to manage not putting my bare feet on one of the rocks which had, moments ago, been sat in the middle of a raging fire.

"So – I just get naked right here?" I asked, looking to Paige. My fingers and face were cold from the brief walk between the westerly roundhouse and the bathing roundhouse. I wanted a hot bath more than I wanted food at that point. But I didn't fancy getting completely naked in front of my best friend and three total strangers. "I mean, in front of everyone?"

Paige smiled serenely. Paige smiled serenely a lot in this place – more than she ever did back in our time. She lifted one arm out of the water and waved it lazily in the air. "No one cares about that here," she said. "Seriously, Emma, it's just not something to be embarrassed about. Anja and Gudry can help if your leather laces are tied too tightly, or if they're frozen."

Nothing Paige said actually stopped me from being embarrassed, but it didn't look like I had a choice. One of the attendants, the one with the friendlier demeanor, approached me and began to work on the ties of the long fur cape.

"I'm Anja," she said. "Don't worry, we'll have you warmed up and clean soon!"

I burned with self-consciousness as I was undressed, and then even more acutely when I was naked, standing in front of everyone. To be fair, no one seemed particularly interested. Not until Anja slid a couple of her fingers over one of my thighs – where the evidence of Ragnar's lust had not been wiped entirely away yet – and giggled before announcing to the room that I must have just come from 'pleasing the visiting Jarl.'

I remember feeling my eyes widening as I turned sharply to Paige with a 'did that just happen?!' look on my face. She just smiled up at me from the tub.

"Paige!" I screeched, my cheeks tingling as I looked from Anja – who didn't seem to think she had said anything wrong – to my friend. "What the fu –"
"It's not a thing," Paige said, chuckling. "I mean, they don't think about sex the way you do. It's not this big 'thing' here, you know? It's like eating or sleeping – don't be embarrassed."

"Uh," I said, because Paige appeared to be serious. It was apparently perfectly fine, in that place, for strangers to wipe cum off other people's thighs while making gossipy comments about their sex life to a roomful of people. "Um. OK."

I think Paige might have noticed that I was actually quite bothered by what had just happened because she pulled herself up to a sitting position in her tub and reached for my hand. "Hey," she said. "Hey, Em."

"What?" I snapped, annoyed that she seemed to be expecting me to somehow immediately adapt myself into this community of perverted Vikings.

"I'm sorry," she said, squeezing my hand. "I – in some ways it doesn't feel like I've been here very long, but having you here has kind of made me realize just how long it's been. Anja didn't mean anything – it really is just how it is here. No one gets uptight about bodies, or sex, or any of –"

"Well that's nice for them!" I cut her off, irritated because now I saw that it was me who was coming off as strange and foreign, not Anja and her lack of boundaries. And as soon as the words were out of my mouth I regretted them, regretted making a big deal out of it.

"I'm sorry," Anja said, looking like she might be about to cry. "I didn't mean to offend anyone – especially a friend of Paige! I won't – I won't do it again, I –"

"It's OK," I said, rubbing my forehead. "It's – uh, yeah. I mean, it's really odd to me but it's OK. I'm not angry."

After everyone's feelings had been smoothed over sufficiently – including my own – I let Anja and Gudry take my hands and help me into the tub. And Paige was correct – it was wonderful. As I submerged my body under the steaming hot water, it was the first time I'd felt truly, completely warm since arriving in the past. The aches of the cold and the lack of mattresses and the simple stress of my situation seemed to leak away into the water.

"See?" My smiling friend asked, turning to me as we both lay with our heads resting on the edges of our tubs. "Isn't it great?"

And I couldn't even pretend to disagree. "I think I want to stay here for a whole day," I told her, my voice slowed now to match the easy pace of everything else in the bathing roundhouse. "Do you think they could bring us supper in here?"

We couldn't really talk about anything to do with my getting back to the present time with Anja, Gudry and Willa – who was introduced to me as Paige's childhood friend and the wife of the man I'd met on my first, brief visit to the past – all within earshot. So instead we just talked of – well, I guess you could say we talked about men. And specifically about which ones were hot, and which ones were not. There was much interest in the new Jarl in their midst – Ragnar.

"Will you marry him?" Willa asked, after she had woken up from her hot-bath-induced sleep and joined the conversation.

"Oh!" I said, laughing. "Oh, um. No! No, of course not."
Three pairs of eyes – all except Paige's – fixed themselves on me, clearly wondering if I was insane.

"Why?" Willa asked plainly a few seconds later.

"Uh," I said. "Uh, I –"

"My friend doesn't yet know who she will marry," Paige jumped in. "Stop pestering her, she's had a long trip from the south."

But Willa, already showing herself as headstrong – to put it mildly – wasn't satisfied. "Long journey?" She asked. "I heard it hardly a day by sea! Tell us, Emma, are you holding out for the King himself? Or do you already have another man's child in that flat belly of yours?"

"No!" I protested, once again offended by the bluntness of the 9th century people. "No I'm not – I'm not pregnant. And I'm not holding out for the King. If you must know, I'm trying to get –"

"You'd best be careful, then" Willa spoke before I'd finished. "Because if there's no baby in there now, there soon will be."

I opened my mouth to respond, but found there was no real response to Willa's comment, because she was right. I turned to Paige, hoping maybe she would be able to put a muzzle on her too-forward friend, but all she did was shrug.

"She's right, Em. I mean, there are other ways to have fun without risking a baby, right?"

At that moment, before I had time to stammer out a sheepish response, Hildy's voice boomed through the wooden walls of the roundhouse.

"Stop your gossiping and get dressed, ladies – the feast begins shortly!"

Gudry and Anja both made faces in the direction of Hildy's voice – faces I suspect they would not have made had she been able to see them, and began to help Paige from her bath.

"Why do you let her speak to you that way?" Gudry asked my friend as Anja wrapped a long length of soft linen around her wet, naked body. "You're the Jarl's wife, lady. You could have her whipped –"

"You're right," Paige replied cheerily. "I could. But without Hildy bossing everyone around I'm not sure this place would run half as smoothly as it does."

Willa left the roundhouse after drying off and dressing herself – I noted that Anja and Gudry seemed explicitly interested in helping Paige, not Willa. Paige kissed her cheek before she left and then turned to me.

"You'll eat at the Jarl's table tonight. That means you have to behave."

I laughed as Anja ran a comb through my hair, assuming Paige was kidding.

"I mean it," she followed up a moment later. "It's not a joke, Em. I can see already that a part of you finds all of this – the Viking ways – silly. I don't blame you, I was even worse when I first came here, half-convinced it was all a show they were putting on just for me. But it's not a show. And Eirik has invited you to sit at our table – if you act badly, it reflects on him. It makes him look bad in front of –"

"Oh my God, Paige!" I burst out, unable to hold my tongue. "Don't talk to me like I'm a damned idiot, OK? What do you think I'm going do, rip all my clothes off and show all
"No," she replied, her voice a little tight. "No, that isn't what I meant. I just meant –"

"Like I said, Paige – I'm not stupid. You're not stupid, either. Remember when you and I had classes together and one of us almost always got the best mark on our papers? Remember that? So yeah, neither of us are dumb and we both know it." Paige moved as if to speak but I kept going. "But I see how you're treated here. And if you think it's too alien to understand, it's not. You know I'm English, you know I understand class and hierarchy and all of that tedious bullshit. All I'm saying is, I'm not going to embarrass you, alright? Not knowingly, anyway. I can't say there aren't any Viking eating customs I'm unfamiliar with. But don't expect me to treat you like royalty. You're not. You're just the same –"

Anja suddenly dropped the hank of my hair which she was busily detangling, and I saw that she wore an expression much like I imagined mine must have been when she drew attention to the fact that there was semen on my leg. "Don't speak to the Jarl's wife like that," she said quietly. "Paige – she should not speak to you in such a –"

"Anja!" Paige suddenly exclaimed, clapping her hands. "Gudry! Leave us. I'll have one of the thralls bring you some meat from the feast later, OK? I need to speak to my friend alone right now."

Without another word, both attendants took their woolen tunics off the hooks near the door, shimmied into them, and left. And as soon as they were gone, Paige and I stood looking at each other, each of us wondering if we still knew the person in front of us.

"You look annoyed," I said. "But I meant what I said – we're the same Paige. We're equals. I know you know it. No one else here knows it, apparently – but we –"

"Of course I know it, Em! Jesus! What do you think? That I want you to kiss my ass or something? I don't. But this is real, do you understand? This is real. This is my real life. These are my people now. And I've learned to just go along with certain things, even if they seem silly or nonsensical to me. So no, this isn't about me thinking I'm better than you or any horseshit like that. It's just about not making waves, OK? You want to get home, don't you?"

I pulled one of the soft linen under-gowns, one of which had been laid out for me, over my head. And as I smoothed the fabric down over my body I found that I felt ashamed of how I'd acted.

"You're right," I said, blinking back a quick tear. "I'm just so stressed out. It's not your fault – it's not anyone's fault, I know it. I don't know why I'm acting so –"

Paige pulled me into her arms and shushed me. "Shh, Em. Shhh. I know. You know I know, don't you? Out of everyone on this planet, in this time or any other time, I truly do know. Come to the feast. Sit with Eirik and Ragnar and myself. Eat your fill. You won't wake up in America in 2017 tomorrow morning, but it will help. I promise."

Why had I ever resented my friend? I shut my eyes as I buried my face in her shoulder, heavy with guilt. It wasn't her fault I was here. What had happened to me back in the present wasn't her fault either. We were both buffeted by high winds, by outside forces. It was folly to try to ascribe responsibility for any of it. At that moment, all I felt was an all-encompassing sense of warmth and gratefulness for her friendship, and her
support in helping me get back home.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled. "I know it's not your fault, Paige. Or my fault. All of this happened to you just as much as it happened to me, didn't it?"

Paige nodded. "It did. But right now, Em, we need to get dressed and get to the feasting hall before Hildy comes back and drags us both there by our ears."

We got dressed. My clothes were much finer than those I'd worn before – softer, woven with more skilled hands and decorated with beads and small colored stones. Even the wool tunic that went over the linen layers had scalloped leather sewn around the cuffs, hem and neckline.

"Ragnar's going to die when he sees me in this," I giggled, looking down and running my fingers over the necklace of black beads Paige was fastening behind my neck.

"You should be careful with that," she commented, patting my shoulder.

"Oh don't worry, I'm not here to steal your baubles! Well, unless –"

"I don't mean the necklace," she said, her voice gently serious, and I realized what she was talking about – my relationship, whatever it was, with Ragnar.

"Oh," I replied. "Oh. Yeah. Paige, if you think I'm going to stay here, or that I'd leave my family to –"

"That isn't what I think, Em. In fact it's the opposite of what I think. I know you're going home – I know it because I remember feeling it myself. But I see the look in your eyes when you talk about him. Don't make it more difficult for yourself than it has to be."

I laughed, but it didn't sound very convincing – even to me. "It's only been a few days, Paige. It's – I mean, it's just fun, isn't it? You saw him, right? He's so hot! What was I supposed to say? No?"

She offered me a small, almost sad smile. "I know, Em. I know. Just be honest with yourself, OK? I'm only saying this because I care about you."

"I know."

We hugged again, holding each other tightly, and then Paige linked her arm with mine and we ducked under the leather flap, gasping at the sudden blast of icy winter air as it filled our lungs.
The feasting hall at Jarl Eirik's encampment was bigger by far than the one in the southern Viking outpost. The logs that made up the walls were thicker, too, standing sturdy and solid in the face of the cold winds. Paige and I found ourselves escorted to the table that sat on a platform a little higher than the rest of the tables – of which there were many, all looking to weight about a ton each, and all ornately carved and piled high with platters and plates and huge clay pots full of food and drink. I wanted to describe it as 'like a movie' but unlike the movies, there were the wonderful smells to take in. Roasted meats and vegetables, venison pies and sausages, the sweetness of the heated mead and the milky steam that rose from the pots of what looked like oatmeal – all of it tickling my nose and sending me into a near-delirium of hunger.

"Oh my God," I whispered to Paige as we took our seats – her next to Eirik at the head of the table, facing the hall, and me next to Ragnar at the side. She turned to me, smiling brightly.

"If the Vikings know how to do anything," she whispered back, "it's a feast. Just be careful to go slowly, or you'll be outside groaning and cursing yourself by the end of the night."

Jarl Eirik nodded at me when I sat down and Ragnar leaned in, as seemingly unperturbed by PDAs as Anja had been at scraping his cum off my thigh, and kissed my neck so slowly I half thought he was going to pull me to my feet and bend me over the table right there in front of everyone.

"You smell good, girl," he told me, kissing my earlobe. "I've suddenly lost interest in this feast."

My head tilted itself away from him, exposing my neck to be kissed even as I giggled and tried to pretend he was having no effect on me. When he slid one hand up my thigh, not stopping until his fingers rested against my sex (albeit through layers of linen and wool), I turned my face up to look at him.

"Ragnar," I breathed, "I –"

"That's all I wanted to see," he grinned. "That look in your eye, Emma. That's the state I want you in for all of this evening. Hungry, needful. And not just for venison and dried fruits. When I take you to bed later, I want to feel how much you want it."

And just like that, his words guaranteed that he was going to get exactly what he
wanted. I actually had to look away immediately, because that feeling of welcome helplessness, the one that felt new despite my past relationships, was coming over me again.

It took a little longer for the hall to fill completely what with the numbers of people in the camp, but when it finally did Eirik stood up and waited for a hush to fall across the room. It didn't take long – as soon as his people saw their Jarl waiting for their attention, they gave it.

"The winter is almost at its darkest," he began, surveying the men, women and children seated at the groaning tables, making eye contact, acknowledging them. "But on the cusp of our first Yule in this new land an old friend arrives, bringing with him the memories of a childhood spent together. We played together at being warriors, in the ever-green fields of youth, and now we find ourselves become the thing we pretended." Eirik turned to Ragnar at this point, with respect and love openly written on his face. "I have missed you, brother. To see you again is to feel the joy of the first warm day of summer two moons early. We have much to discuss, and the path forward for our people to plan. We welcome you and your party to our outpost in the land of the East Angles, we celebrate your presence over the Yule time, and we offer you our hospitality. Welcome, brothers!"

At that point, Jarl Eirik took hold of the horn drinking flagon set in front of him and raised it up. His people mirrored his gesture with their own cups. And then, just before taking a swig, Eirik turned to me, grinning.

"And sister! Welcome brothers – and sister!"

"And sister!" His people shouted in unison, before everyone drank and the room transformed from quietly attentive to raucous in the space of less than a minute. Servers streamed into the hall, bringing the food that they had not been able to find room for on the central tables, and making their way down the rows of hungry Vikings, doling out huge chunks of chewy, dark bread and filling drinking cups to the brim from clay jugs sloshing with ale.

Because we were seated at a table that was not within reach of the meal, we were brought all of our food. Within seconds there was a bowl of what looked exactly like my mother's beef stew sitting in front of me – and it smelled heavenly. Vegetables followed, roasted and doused with copious amounts of melted butter, and then plates of smoked fish, bread, hard cheese and some kind of dark berry jam.

It was only after I'd tucked into a selection of all of it that I noticed Paige watching me. I caught her eye and she laughed. "See?" She asked. "It's not quite guts-pie, is it?"

Guts-pie. I remembered that conversation, before we had parted for what we both assumed would be the last time. I had believed that in the past – the one she was choosing to live in – people ate badly, subsisting on offal and fibrous, unidentifiable vegetables that required boiling for hours before they became edible. It didn't take more than a few bites at the Viking feast to see how wrong I'd been. It wasn't even that everything was comparable to modern times – it wasn't. It was far better. The butter wasn't a pale, almost flavorless spread – it was deep yellow, nutty, and it tasted very strongly of itself. The bread was dense and toothsome, but tender at the same time and,
again, it tasted of the grain it had been made from.

"Oh my God," I exclaimed again, after tasting the stew and realizing with a pang of guilt that it was more delicious than anything my mother had ever made. "This is – yeah, this isn't guts-pie."

It didn't take long before I began to feel full. Jarl Ragnar warned me to slow down, that the feast was to continue on into the night, but everything was too good and I was too hungry – I didn't listen. Later, platters of what I at first thought was roast beef but was actually venison were brought in and what looked like a third of an entire deer laid right in front of us, at the high table.

Jarl Eirik stood then, taking a dagger from his waist, and carved a small piece of dark, still-bloody meat from the center of the joint. With loving ceremony he presented it to Paige, before bending down to kiss her. It was a simple thing, and one I could tell was a ritual for the two of them, but something about it took my breath away. Was it the way they looked at each other? The way Paige's eyes shone with love and admiration when she took Eirik's gift? Was it Eirik's tenderness with his wife? I didn't know. It felt like a moment I wouldn't normally be witnessing, a fleeting glimpse into another relationship, one I was not part of.

At any other time it would have made me envious. Happy for my friend, because it was obvious she was loved – and loved well – but envious for the fact that no one looked at me that way, no one treated me with such solicitousness. At the Viking feast, though, instead of envy there was a kind of recognition. I'd caught Ragnar looking at me that way. Hadn't I? I turned to him, as if to check I had not been imagining things, and saw that he was not watching Paige and Eirik. He was watching me. And yes, there it was in the icy blue of his eyes – that same expression. He leaned in close and squeezed my thigh under the table.

"I saw it there, Emma," he said. "For a moment, I saw it. That strange emotion you see in women when one of their most loved friends finds the love that all women crave. I saw it approach you, and then I saw it veer away like a rabbit from a hound. You know already what's in my heart, don't you?"

I couldn't look at Ragnar at that moment. I turned my eyes up, as if to meet his, and then I focused on a point just above his left ear. Not because I didn't believe him, but because I did. And because I knew none of it could come to fruition – not the way it had for Paige and Eirik. I couldn't stay. And, when I got home, I couldn't come back the way she had.

And even as I looked into the distance, a deeper part of me – deeper than thought, deeper than rationality – knew it was already too late.

Before I could descend deeper into dark thoughts of the goodbyes to come, Paige's father appeared and took his spot at our table. In his arms he carried his grandson, who played with a string of large, orange-toned pebbles clutched in his chubby hands.

"Your son?" Ragnar asked, getting up from his spot as Eirik did the same. Paige and I watched as one Jarl passed his baby to the other. "How old is he? Ten moons?"

"Not five," Eirik responded, his voice bright with pride. "Born towards summer's end."

Ragnar raised his eyebrows and Paige turned to look at me as the men commented on
the baby's size, his obvious robustness, the strength of his grip. She reached out, seeming to feel what was in my heart – the great, rising tide of affection at seeing Ragnar with a baby in his arms – and squeezed my hand.

"Tomorrow we'll go into the woods together," she said gently. "It's almost Yule, we need to gather boughs and greenery for the roundhouses and the camp. It's a special task, only women are allowed to perform it – and even then only some. We'll be guarded by warriors, there's nothing to fear."

Paige was reassuring me, telling me there was nothing to fear. But even as she spoke I could see that she didn't even believe her own words – and that she wasn't talking about dangers in the woods, either.

The feast went on for hours. Jarl Eirik gave more speeches. So did Jarl Ragnar. The food and drink came in endless waves, my bowl always piled high before I could clean it, my cup always filled before I could empty it. In the end I had no memory of the last hour or so – Ragnar told me the next say that I fell asleep on his lap and he carried me to the roundhouse himself and brushed the crumbs off my tunic before laying beside the fire to sleep it all off.

It was one of the most memorable and meaningful experiences of my life, one of those times that even at it happens you know you will carry with you always. The shining eyes of the happy people in the feasting hall – the Viking children and the men and women – and the contentment that came from feeling, strangely, as if I belonged there. These things would be with me for as long as I had the power to remember, I knew that.
It took an entire day to recover from that feast. And on the next, Ragnar was up and gone early, off to confer with Eirik and both of their advisors, and I woke to the light of mid-day, as a girl topped up the fire-pit with fresh wood.

"Mmph," I said, rubbing my eyes and sensing her presence before I was fully awake. "What time is it?"

When there was no answer I asked again and saw, once I had opened my eyes, that she looked nervous.

"What?" I asked, not understanding. "Don't you know what – oh. Yeah. OK. Uh – it's fine. Thanks for the firewood."

"May I go?"

"Sure – yeah, of course!"

She scuttled out of the westerly roundhouse and I lay back on the furs as the new logs began to spit and crackle in the flames, reminding myself that the Vikings didn't seem to think of time the way modern people did. It made sense – no one had clocks or watches or any sense of what a second or an hour was. They seemed to speak mostly in terms of moon cycles, seasons, nights and days. When I asked how they knew what the first day of Yule was, Ragnar told me that the healers and the 'gothi' knew, that they had special carved stones they used to judge the angle of the sun's light and determine the shortest and longest days. I remembered learning about even more ancient civilizations of the British Isles in school, how many archeologists believed their stone circles and mysterious structures had been built according to the position of the sun in the sky at various times of the year.

"Hey, sleepyhead."

I looked up to Paige's face poking in the door of the roundhouse. "I wasn't sure if you were, um, busy with Ragnar or not."

"What, you think I've been getting laid all morning?" I replied, grinning. "No such luck, he left early today – before I was awake."

Paige came in and sat by the newly-stoked fire, not bothering to remove her fur cape. "Yeah, so did Eirik. He says more of them are coming – more Vikings. He says the Jarl's council – what does he call it? The 'thing' – in the Northlands has – "

"The thing?" I asked, not sure I was understanding. "What thing?"
Paige laughed. "Yeah, that's exactly what I said when Eirik told me about it. It's a meeting – the thing, I mean. That's what they call it. The 'thing.' But it's not like this meeting they're having right now, here. It's bigger. The Jarls and the free people from different clans, even warring clans, come together to discuss whatever business they have between them. Eirik says that at the last large 'thing' it was agreed to move beyond the pillage and invasions of this place – to begin settling the land and moving the Northmen and women here to live and marry and raise children. This encampment – and Jarl Ragnar's, and a few others that are already here – are just the beginning."

"I read about this, you know," I said then, thinking back to my studies of Viking Britain.

"So did I," Paige replied. "A little. I don't remember all of it now but I do remember that the Vikings will conquer parts of Britain and settle here – or they did settle here, I mean."

"You don't know what tense to use," I commented. "Past or present."

She smiled and shook her head. "You're right. Although that was mostly for your benefit. These days it's becoming easier and easier to think of this place as the real place, you know? Like, I understand that the future still exists, and cars and planes and the internet still exist, somewhere out there, but every day it feels more and more like a place I only know from a dream."

It made me feel uneasy to hear Paige talking like that. I wanted to grab her shoulders and get in her face and remind her that it wasn't a dream. That all of it still existed, as real and true as the Viking settlement around us. I didn't, because I didn't feel it was my right – if part of her needed to see where she came from as somehow unreal, I supposed that was her right. But it did make me slightly uncomfortable. Paige seemed to sense it, too, because she reached for my under-dress and tossed it onto the furs that covered me.

"Come on, then. We're going out to the woods to find holly and green boughs for Yule. And it's cold again so you better dress well."

Less than twenty minutes later Paige and myself were crunching across the frost-laden grasses, headed for the woods and trailed by four Viking warriors – not mere guards, but actual fighting men. Two belonged to Ragnar and two to Eirik, and I found the sound of their swords slapping against their leathers and furs as we left the camp to be rather reassuring.

A mist hung over the land that day, bringing with it a muffling effect that leant the proceedings a magical air.

"What are we looking for again?" I asked Paige, when we got into the woods. Other women were doing the same thing we were, and at times we could hear their voices, carried in strange ways on the fog.

"Holly," she said. "But other things, too. Eirik says the idea is to bring some of the greenery and smell of the outdoors into the drab winter roundhouses, to cheer up the dullest part of the year."

"So it's like Christmas lights?"

Paige laughed. "Yeah, I suppose it is."

We didn't talk very much as we made our way slowly through the trees, out feet
rustling in the frost-crisp leaves that covered the ground and our cheeks glowing bright pink in the clear, cold air. At one point, a robin with a bright red breast alighted on a branch in front of us and Paige pulled a piece of dark Viking bread out of her leather pouch and scattered a few crumbs of it across her gloved palm. I watched, breathless, as she held her hand out towards the robin.

"The frost and snow covers the ground," she whispered, as the bird leapt onto her outstretched palm and pecked greedily at the breadcrumbs. "They get hungry."

"Can I try?" I asked, half-convinced Paige had acquired some ancient magical powers, and that no bird would ever hop willingly into my own hand.

But when I pulled one of my gloves off and Paige sprinkled some crumbs into my grasp the robin fluttered easily from her hand to my own. I gasped at the incredible lightness of the tiny, cold feet on my skin.

"Oh!" I whispered, shocked into near-speechlessness. "Look, Paige!"

We stood transfixed in the winter mist, watching the robin until he'd had his fill and taken his cheerful leave of us. And then we continued the search for holly and boughs, pinecones and fallen branches of a particularly pleasing look. After the encounter with the robin, I felt filled with awe, infused with that feeling I remembered from childhood Christmases, when the world seemed as if it was bursting with goodwill and possibility. It almost made me tear up, to think that I would never be able to share it with anyone back home, in the present – I wouldn't even be able to tell them about it.

"Here," Paige exclaimed, as we wandered to and fro, the tips of our noses getting pinker the longer we stayed out. "Holly!"

My arms were already heavy with fir boughs, tendrils of dark green ivy and other vegetation, but the holly was the one thing we'd wanted to find. Paige used the small knife she carried on her hip to take what we needed and piled it into my arms, laughing when one or the other of us got stabbed with a thorn.

"There," she said, when it seemed we couldn't carry anymore. "This will brighten everything up in the camp, won't it?"

It seemed such a simple thing to do, but the difference it made after my best friend and I raced back to camp and helped each other decorate our Jarl's roundhouses was amazing. I stood back at one moment in the westerly roundhouse, taking in the new scent of the place after Paige and I had hung and garlanded almost every spare surface with the fresh liveliness of the outdoors.

"This is crazy!" I said, breathing the scent of fir trees and frost and ivy deep into my lungs. "All of this was right here – just out in the woods! We have woods in 2017, you know."

"I know," she nodded.

"But I've never done this before in my life. I usually buy candles. You know, candles full of fake perfume, fake baking smells, fake Christmas tree smell. When I could just go and get the real things for free. That's bonkers!"

It was true. The westerly roundhouse, at that precise moment, on a cold night just before Yule in the 9th century, was the most breathtakingly Christmassy scene I have ever witnessed – and only two people in the whole camp would even have recognized the
word 'Christmas.' The flickering flames from the candles lit everything with a soft glow, including the fat, red berries on the holly branches and the pink cheeks of the two women who had just spent the afternoon in the cold winter woods. Whatever wonderful magic was afoot that evening, Paige felt it too. She turned to me, smiling, as we admired our work, and then she pulled me into her arms.

"I know you have to leave," she whispered as we held each other tight. "I know, Emma. But while you're here, let's enjoy this, OK? Let's suck every ounce of marrow out of this so we can go on with the rest of our lives with happy memories of this time – of all of it.

When she pulled away I saw that her eyes were glimmering, and in turn the candle-flames became hazy in my own vision as we both thought, although it remained unspoken, of the finite nature of our time together.

Ragnar walked in on us like that and, although I saw that he was about to make a jokey comment, checked himself when he saw my expression, and that of my friend.

"What is it?" He asked, slipping one of his strong arms around my waist. "What is it, my lovely girl? Has something happened? Paige – has –"

"No," I shook my head, leaning into his body. "No, nothing's happened. Paige and I gathered holly this afternoon – and boughs. Do you see?"

But Jarl Ragnar was already looking around, a smile spreading across his face. He closed his eyes a moment later and breathed deeply of the scented air.

"Are you two responsible for this?" He asked, turning back to me and pulling me into his arms, lifting me off my feet so he could kiss me.

"Mm-hm," I told him, proud as punch at his reaction.

Paige reached out, then, and tugged at my sleeve lightly. "I'll see you later, Em, OK?"

Our eyes met for a brief moment, the understanding passed between us – it was time for both of us to be with our men, but we would not forget the afternoon we had just spent together.

"OK, Paige. See you soon."

As soon as she was gone Ragnar set me down in front of him and took my face in his hands. "Look at this place!" He enthused, pausing to kiss my mouth once, and then again. "Emma, have I been wrong to think of you as a savage from a foreign land? A particularly beautiful savage, it must be admitted, but a savage nonetheless? You're not as wild as you seem, are you? Look at this place, as well-garlanded as if a true Viking wife had done it."

Jarl Ragnar was being deliberately effusive, but he wasn't making any of it up – I could see it in his eyes. I could see something else in his eyes, too, and feel something else from the way he pulled my body against his. He needed me again, and the plain fact of his need kindled the little flame inside me into a bright, roaring fire. I helped him pull off my woolen tunic, and the layers of linens underneath, and then I put my hands on his as he pressed them into my flesh and forgot about all the holly and the candles and the smell of fir branches and everything else in the world except one thing.

I lay back on the bed of furs and opened my legs for Ragnar and took him into me the way I opened my mouth to breathe, or curled onto my side to sleep at night. I didn't have
to think, because it just happened between us, as naturally as taking breath. And as it
seemed to be with us, he carried me along with him, stoking the fire in my loins with that
in his own, and with the look in his eyes when he was close.

"Ragnar," I sighed into his shoulder when I came, my voice almost fading out before
rising, sharply, into a helpless little scream as my fingernails sank into his back and my
body arched up off the furs, offering itself up to him like a sacrifice, begging him to let me
give him the pleasure he was giving me.

He drove himself into me and held himself there, his mouth open on mine so I could
feel every panted breath as he throbbed and pulsed and emptied himself completely.

We stayed there, our naked limbs tangled together, until the fire needed more wood.
Ragnar covered me in a fur and got up to take care of it and I lay back, watching him.

There was no mistaking his utter gorgeousness there in the westerly roundhouse, as his
battle-honed muscles and the solid, male contours of his face were on such display. I
wondered, looking at him, what he would be doing if he had been born in the 1990s, like
me.

"Why do you look at me that way?" He asked when he caught me. "As if you ponder
what piece of me would make the juiciest roast?"

I laughed and opened my arms, pulling him back to me when the fire was re-stoked.
"I was just thinking," I replied, "about what you would be doing if you came from the
southeast, across the sea – where I'm from."

"What is it you mean? Are your people not in need of warriors, girl? Of jarls and
kings?"

I mean, we did still need warriors in 2017 – leaders, too. But it was no longer
anything like a given that a young man would enter the military, and leadership so often
seemed to be about who had the most lust for power than it did about who cared the
most about being a good leader. "We are," I told him. "But it's different. It's very
different. I think maybe your talents would be wasted in the place I'm from. You'd still
have those blue eyes, though, and those magnificent shoulders – so you'd still have packs
of sorority girls chasing you. But I don't know if –"

"What girls?" he asked, and I couldn't help but chuckle at the thought of Ragnar at a
frat party. He'd probably get kicked out as soon as the frat boys realized they weren't
going to get any female attention at all with a real-life Viking in their midst.

"I just mean – young women. Women around my
age."

"And what is that age, exactly? Sometimes I think you older than myself, with some of
the things you say, some of the things you seem to know. But other times I catch a
glimpse of those teeth or that skin, free of marks, and think you years
younger."

"I'm twenty-two winters," I told him, correctly using winters as the replacement for
years, the way the Vikings seemed to, but forgetting that they had a peculiar way of
expressing numbers over ten. "I mean, ten and ten and two winters. How about you?"

"How old do you think?" He asked, running his thumb over one of my cheeks, and I
found my dilemma almost the same as his. Ragnar didn't look older than 26. But he
seemed so much wiser than the 20-something men I knew, so much more experienced in
the ways of the world and other people.
"Ten and ten and, um, seven?" I guessed.
"Close," he came back. "I'm ten and ten and four."

I lay back and looked up at the small opening at the peak of the roundhouse, where the smoke from the fire escaped. Ragnar was 24 – the same age as one of the boys I'd briefly dated at grand Northeastern, whose main priorities in life seemed to be his hair styling routine and his weekend party schedule. How was that possible, that one of those men was leading a force of warriors, responsible for a tribe of people – keeping them safe and fed and sheltered – and the other would have balked at a single day's honest labor?

I snuggled into Ragnar's chest, smiling the self-satisfied smile of a girl who knows she's in the best man's bed.

His ease, his satisfaction – a good portion of which I took personal, prideful credit for – made me think of him as a contented lion. Although he lay on a bed of furs with me, he seemed in some other way to lie at the crest of a hill in the middle of some hot, windswept African veldt, surveying his territory, attended to by his lioness.

"Jarl Eirik tells me to keep you from my heart," he said suddenly, jerking me out of the sweet softness of pre-slumber in his arms.

"What?" I asked, rubbing my eyes and pushing myself up so I could look him in the eyes. "What did Eirik –"

"He says you're leaving. He says he can see it in you, the way he saw it in Paige. Does he speak the truth?"

I didn't want to talk about my leaving. I didn't want to think about it. All I wanted to do was keep it fenced off in one of the far corners of my mind so I could spend the night floating in the bliss that was being with Jarl Ragnar. I didn't want to disturb myself with thoughts of our inevitable parting.

But he was pained, I could see it, and at first it didn't even occur to me why, even with all the signs and hints that Ragnar was, almost inexplicably, interested in more than just sleeping with me before we got bored of each other.

"I – uh," I stammered. "I don't want to leave you."

"You don't want to leave me? Then don't. What steals you away from me before we've even begun, Emma? Do I –" he reached down and spread his fingers wide over my midsection – "need to put a baby in you? Will that make you stay? Perhaps it's done already, and a new life grows within you? Eirik admits – only to me, he says – that he is not sure Paige would have returned were it not for having their baby son in her arms. Is it the same way with you? Because if it is –"

Ragnar slipped one hand down between my legs, parting them, and I put my hand on his wrist, stopping him and sitting the rest of the way up.

"Wait," I said, as much to the rushing thoughts in my own mind as to Ragnar. "Wait. Hold on. Are you talking about a baby? Why would I –" I broke off, because I realized I was about to ask a very silly question. I was about to ask Ragnar why he thought I might already have a baby growing inside me – and the question answered itself before it could be spoken. I'd already slept with him, unprotected, multiple times. I could have a baby in my belly. I knew it before that first time, in the feasting hall. And so far, I'd managed to ignore it. It was as if part of me still didn't quite believe anything that was happening in
the 9th century was real. As if any babies conceived in this time would turn out to be nothing more than figments of my own imagination once I returned to the future. Even with the living proof babbling in my best friend's lap to disabuse me of this dangerous notion, some part of me was still clinging to it.

I blinked, lost in my own thoughts, when Ragnar took my chin in his hands and turned me towards him. "You don't want a baby?" He asked, not making any effort to hide the worry in his eyes.

A baby?! I wanted to screech. A baby? We haven't even discussed if we're exclusive yet!

And for all my showy internal protestations, for all my raised eyebrows, there was also the knowledge that Ragnar – his body, his arms, his wide, cocky grin – felt like home. I couldn't reason it out, I couldn't make sense of it, it was just the truth. If I'd been with him a week, a day, an hour – it didn't matter. He knew it, and so did I. The difference was that it was nothing strange to him, nothing he didn't naturally just accept for what it was.

"I'm sorry I spoke of it before the morning," he said quietly. "It troubles you, and the last thing I want is to trouble you, Emma. I see a duality in your eyes, a protestation, one that I've already seen so many times in you. But I also see the other part, the part you're trying to hide from me, that you think I can't see. I won't push you any further tonight. Put your sweet little face against my neck, so I can fall asleep to your breathing."

I did as told, grateful for the temporary reprieve. But even as I drifted off, and as Ragnar's own breathing became slow and even, I knew in my bones that what was between us was something rare and precious. And that going home, which I unquestionably had to do, was going to mean leaving it behind forever.

"I feel like some kind of housewife," I laughed a couple of days later to Paige as she and I sat in the large and well-appointed roundhouse she shared with her husband and their son. "He leaves in the morning and then he comes back in the evenings, full of stories about 'work.'"

It was mid-afternoon, another day that was cold enough to keep almost everyone indoors, and my best friend and I were relaxing beside the fire-pit as she tried to teach me how to braid a series of slim, flat pieces of dried grasses together, eventually to be turned into a summer hat. It wasn't working at all, because I've never been good with my hands – especially when it comes to detail work.

"Ugh, Paige, I can't do it," I complained, throwing down my lumpy, misshapen braid next to her smooth, flat one. "And I'm dying for some chocolate. You and Eirik don't have any, do you? Hidden away from the little people?"

Paige laughed. "Unfortunately no, we don't. I really missed sweets at first. I guess I still do – but what use is thinking about cake if you can never have any?"

I shrugged. "Maybe. I don't know. Telling me I can never have something usually just has the effect of making me want it even more."
There was a rhythm to life in the Viking camp, just as there had been a rhythm to my life in 2017. I was no longer waking up to the loud beeping of my iPhone's alarm, or stumbling into the first class of the day with my hair still wet from the shower, or stopping off at the little grocery store on the corner near my flat, though. I slept, during those early days in Eirik's camp, as late as I wished. Ragnar usually woke me gently before he left just after dawn, so he could make sleepy, urgent morning love to me before tucking me in again and kissing my forehead as I drifted back into sleep. Hours later, I would get dressed in the warm roundhouse and then dash through the chilly air to the feasting hall to eat bread and cheese and dried fish that reminded me of kippers. During the afternoons I would sit with Paige and baby Eirik, chatting and exclaiming over the baby's every new talent.

It didn't need discussing – I knew why Paige had come back. It was obvious. Life was slower with the Vikings, people were more connected to what they did with their time and everyone's lives were interwoven in a way that almost made me resent what I had to go back to. Not that I ever wavered on going back. I could no more let my family suffer for the rest of their lives than I could fly to the moon under my own power. But it wasn't a wholly obvious choice, even then.

On the morning of the shortest day of the year – December 21st, although no one called it that – Jarl Ragnar gently shook me awake in the full darkness of the night.

I rolled over and opened my mouth to kiss him, smiling, assuming the reason for his attentions. But he wasn't waking me up because he needed to feel my body underneath him, he was waking me up for – what?

"It's still dark," I murmured, giggling as he kissed. "What are you doing? Why are –"

"Wake up, Emma," he whispered. "We must go to the beach to witness the death of the sun. Come on, get up, get up, it's going to take forever to get dressed."

I didn't know what he was talking about – the death of the sun? what? – and I wasn't sure I'd heard him correctly, but I was too tired to protest. Fifteen minutes later I found myself stumbling down one of the paths that led to the beach, my hand clasped in Ragnar's and my cheeks flushed pink in the pre-dawn cold. It seemed most everyone else in camp was headed in the same direction, too.

"Ragnar," I whispered, as he pulled me along. "What are we –"

"Shhh," he replied, as we came to the beach, and I noticed a quiet had fallen – no one seemed to be talking, even as the sand was crowded with people.

"The sun is swallowed by the darkness on this day," he whispered to me when we'd found a spot next to Eirik and Paige at the front of the crowd. "But she gives birth to her daughter before she goes. That is what Yule is, beautiful Emma. We nurture the new sun, we welcome the new season and the passing out of the people from the grip of death and darkness."

I looked up at him, even though it was far too dark to see anything, but he didn't offer any more explanation. And before I could question him further, a voice – a shaky male voice, one I did not recognize and that seemed to belong to an old man – rose thinly in the winter air just as the first hints of light began to appear at the horizon.

"The gods slumber," the voice said, and there was a low murmur of agreement from
the gathered crowd. "The gods slumber near death, the cycle of the seasons slumbers near death, the sun is come on her morning birth-bed to start the Yule period. Jarl Eirik, step forward! Jarl Ragnar, step forward!"

I clutched at Ragnar's hand, uneasy because I didn't understand what was going on or why we were all outside in the freezing wind when we should have been back in our beds, but he squeezed my fingers and left me where I was. Slowly, as the light began to leak into the sky, I could make out his figure next to Eirik's on the beach. A much shorter man stood in front of him, with his back to the waves. There was an object in his hands, one he held up as I watched, sensing a strange anticipation in the crowd around me.

When the first rays of the sun fully broke the horizon, I actually gasped out loud as the object in the old man's hands let a select few of them spill through a hole in its center, concentrating their intensity and illuminating the faces of Jarl Ragnar and Jarl Eirik. I looked around as the dawn came on in full, searching for a similar reaction to my own, but all the Vikings stood solemnly, staring out at their Jarl, and the first moments of the new season.

Moments later – and without warning – a great shout arose from the people. Arms were lifted into the air – I even spotted a few children raised above their parent's heads – and the pale light of the solstice's dawn was welcomed.

"The sun's daughter comes!" The old man on the beach intoned. "As weak and fragile as a newborn babe! If we take this period of Yule to nurture her, to sacrifice for her, to cast our minds to the seasons past and the seasons yet to come, and to set aside the darkness, she will warm the earth and us in turn!"

I've always felt a little silly at church ceremonies. Not that my family was truly religious – we went at Christmas, we went to weddings and christenings and funerals, but we needed the songbooks to remember the words to the hymns and it had always felt so anachronistic, such an ill-fit to the supermarkets and subways and billboards advertising mobile phone plans outside. But I didn't feel silly on the beach that day, as the morning light spread over everyone that had gathered to see it break. No one had to tell me it was a spiritual happening, either – I could feel it around me, manifesting as if from the Vikings themselves, or the air around us or maybe the weak winter sun herself, as the man on the beach seemed to be saying. He sang a song as we all stood huddled together, and then another. When it was time to leave, Paige came rushing through the crowd, her eyes bright despite the early hour, and took my hands in hers.

"Did you like it?" She asked. "I told Ragnar not to tell you anything, just to let you see it for what it was."

"I –" I started, and then stopped because I felt embarrassed, as if I couldn't say what the dawn ceremony had made me feel without looking stupid.

"It's OK," Paige told me, putting her arm around my shoulders and starting the walk back to camp. "I understand. The first thing I experienced like this was a funeral – one of Eirik's warriors was killed and they burned his body on a huge pyre at night. I'd never seen anything like it."

"Yeah," I nodded, because she was right – I'd never seen anything like what I'd just seen. More importantly, I'd never felt anything like it, either. It was almost as if I believed
everything the old man had said. As if I had felt the movements of something profound and intrinsic, the ticking over of some earthly cycle whose sounds and effects were, back in 2017, muffled entirely by modern life. I turned back, briefly, and squinted up at the pale orb just beginning its daily journey across the sky and then clapped a hand over my mouth as I suddenly became emotional.

"It's–" I started, gulping and wiping my eyes. "I'm sorry, this is so dumb, but I felt it. I felt it."

Paige looked at me then, and she didn't have to say anything because she understood and I knew it. She squeezed her arm around me even tighter and leaned her head against my shoulder. "Come on, Emma. Let's go get some breakfast."

On the way to the feasting hall the old man from the beach walked by, attended by a small, mixed-sex group of younger people who held their heads at low, respectful angles. The man wasn't tall like the Jarls, nor was he broad. But he wore a tunic decorated with the most elaborate beadwork and embroidery I had seen since I came to the 9th century. Fine threads of leather hung from his cuffs, each with tiny stones and beads fastened at the ends, and they click-clacked against each other with every step the man took. He wore a lot of jewelry, too – gold rings on his fingers, leather bracelets – and his face had the expression of a person who wasn't thinking about mundane matters.

"The gothi," Paige said, when the man had passed. "They're sort of like priests – he only arrived a few weeks ago, after Eirik determined that the community here was now settled enough and big enough to warrant a spiritual leader. He spends a lot of time outside of camp, gathering materials for rituals and – I don't even really know. Eirik says it's not something people talk about much."

When we were seated in the feasting hall with a few others – it was not a communal meal, it appeared – enough time had passed since waking that my stomach rumbled with hunger. A young servant placed a plate of bread – just bread, no cheese, no butter – in front of me, but I didn't take a bite, assuming the cheese and butter would soon arrive. It did not.

"Get used to it," Paige said, biting into a piece of the sadly naked bread. "The feasting doesn't start for another couple of weeks."

"What?" I asked, hoping she was joking. "It's December 21st, right? Are you telling me that Christmas dinner here is going to be plain bread and ale?"

She shrugged, taking a sip from her own cup of ale to wash down the dry bread. "It's not just one big party season here," she told me. "Did you listen to what the gothi said? There is a period of sacrifice, of hunger and deprivation, before we can feast. Eirik says it's because the new sun would be jealous if we partied when she was still weak and young. We need to prove ourselves worthy."

I put my head in my hands, not entirely sure the beautiful ceremony on the beach was going to be worth two weeks of a rumbling belly.

"If it's any help," Paige said, "I've found these cultural rituals really beautiful – and useful. It's an interesting thing to go without, you know? To go without material things, I mean – food, comfort, sex. No one in the modern world would –"

"Wait!" I exclaimed, holding one hand up. "Sex? We have to go without sex?!!"
"Not us," Paige grinned at my reaction. "Well, I mean, not the people. But the Jarls do, which I suppose means we do, too. Unless you feel like taking one of the warriors out into the woods. There are Yule-beds, too – which just means we're not allowed as many furs as –"

"So you've done this before?"

"No, actually. As I said, this is the first Yule that Eirik has felt the people were ready to observe in full. He says now we have a gothi and more than enough provisions and the people are more settled here, it's time. He says the rituals keep the people together, keep everything coherent."

"No sex!" I asked again, incredulous.

Paige shook her head. "Nope. Not until the first feast night of Yule."

"Ragnar won't be able to do it," I told her confidently. "He won't. I know he –"

"He has to," Paige replied. "It's not an option. He's a Jarl, he has to. So you better just get used to taking care of yourself, if you know what I mean."

"Are you being serious?" I asked, not entirely convinced Paige wasn't joking – about the no-sex part, anyway. "And if you are – why? Why no sex?"

She grinned. "That's exactly what I asked Eirik when he told me. It's not everyone – well, Eirik says it's supposed to be – but the only people who are really held to it are the Jarls, the gothis and people of very high rank. It seems to be one of those 'set an example' things."

"Yeah, OK," I said. "But that still doesn't explain why. Why ban sex in the first place – especially when it's this cold and there nothing else to do?"

I picked up a piece of dense, butter-less Viking bread and took a bite as Paige explained. "I asked Eirik about that, too. He said it's a 'quiet' time of the year. The days are dark and short, the food stores are often low – although that's not the case this year, with all the successful raids – he says it's a kind of enforced break from the usual routine, a time for people to go inwards, to look to themselves and what they wish for in the coming year, rather than eating and drinking and fucking themselves into oblivion before Yule."

"Mm-hm," I responded, thinking. I still didn't believe Ragnar and I were going to be able to keep our hands off each other, but I could see a kind of sense in what Paige was saying. It was like the old tradition of letting a field lie fallow for a season, to give the soil a 'rest.' Something about the idea of treating souls the same way – even if I didn't think I believed in souls – just felt appropriate and right.

"I thought it was silly at first," Paige continued. "But after thinking about it a little more, it kind of makes sense, don't you think?"

I nodded. "Actually, yes. A period of rest – what better time of year than this one? Even in our time everything slows down around Christmas, doesn't it?"

"Imagine how much better the feast nights – and the nights with our Jarls, after the feasts – will be after a period of deprivation beforehand? The Vikings are good at this kind of thing, they don't all fall apart and start whining the minute they don't get exactly what they want, exactly when they want it. I won't say it hasn't taken me time to adjust – and I'm still adjusting – but I feel like it's been good for me. Like it's made me more
And so the first period of Yule began, and I found myself swept along on the tide of a tradition that felt at once alien and strangely soothing, even in its difficult early days. As it turned out, Ragnar and I weren't given the chance to try to keep our hands off each other because the two Jarls and their highest warriors were separated from their women during the nights. Paige and I, and the other women, slept in the roundhouses. Ragnar, Eirik and the warriors spent their nights outside the camp walls, sometimes with the gothi, sometimes alone, shivering in the snowy woods. When I asked Ragnar what it was about, he seemed more tight-lipped than usual, before explaining to me one evening, as we ate a supper of thin gruel and plain bread in the feasting hall, that it wasn't something he was meant to talk about. And then, when he saw that my curiosity was piqued rather than sated, he smiled and leaned in to whisper in my ear.

"Gods, Emma, the last thing I want is to go back to the forest tonight, where the gothi makes us drink foul teas and leads us on journeys between worlds. What I want is to come back to the roundhouse with you and pull all the dressings off –"

"Foul teas?" I asked, intrigued. "Journeys between worlds? What does –"

But Ragnar shook his head, and I watched as his eyes crawled slowly over my face and lingered on my lips. I wanted to know what was happening in the woods at night between the Jarls and their gothi. I wanted to know what ancient rituals were playing out under the moonlight. But in that moment, when I saw the look in Ragnar's eyes, a pull much more powerful than curiosity yanked me out of my imaginings and sent my arms around his muscled neck.

"Emma!" A female voice rang out immediately from the entranceway to the feasting hall. "Are you finished with your supper?"

We had chaperones during the first part of Yule – well, the men had chaperones. Young men and women in Hildy's service, and almost as annoyingly on top of things as she was. And this particular chaperone's task was to watch Jarl Ragnar that night, to make sure he didn't break the Yule tradition and take me right there on one of the feasting tables.

Ragnar looked at me for a moment before the girl came to lead him away, back to the gothi and the winter night and the spaces between worlds. His eyes were the same color as ever, even in the weak light of the feasting hall, but a darkness had passed over them, then, and for a brief moment I understood why sex was not permitted during that time. If your mind is focused on earthly pleasures, it can make it difficult – maybe impossible – to focus on other thoughts, other ways of being. Of course the gothi didn't want the Jarls and the warriors losing themselves in women and mead and roasted meat during that sacred time of the year, when the eyes of their souls were called to gaze elsewhere.

Not that my understanding lasted long, when Ragnar was led away and I found myself alone at the feasting table, aching for his body, his mouth on mine.

It wasn't just the men who spent their time in the midst of ritual and spirituality
during Yule. The women, too, had work to do. The healers – as Paige referred to the small group of older women who tended the sick and delivered babies and womanly wisdom to the people – came to us periodically, to lead Paige and myself and the other Viking wives in the performance of some rite or another.

Part of me was aggrieved when I was led alone one morning to a hot-spring by one of the healers. She stripped me naked in the freezing air and, just as I was about to climb into the relief of the hot water, she produced a thin, flexible tree branch, still adorned with dried leaves, and ran it over my body, gently at first, and then increasingly not-gently as she began to hit me with it until almost every inch of me was pink and stinging. When she finally allowed me into the water, she left the branch and instructed me to get out every little while and hit myself with it, until my skin tingled with the cold and I couldn't stand it any longer.

It wasn't even the physical ordeal – the feeling of the hot water on my cold, sensitive skin was about as close to orgasmic as I've ever experienced without it being the real thing. No, it was not that that annoyed me. It was something the healer said about the purpose of the bath – that it would make me beautiful – for Jarl Ragnar.

Great, I wanted to say, when I sank for the first of many times into the hot ecstasy of the spring. So the men are off journeying between worlds, thinking higher thoughts, and I'm just here making myself pretty for one of them. Wonderful.

Not that I was annoyed enough to leave the spring, of course. But I did bring it up later that evening with Paige, as we sat in her roundhouse wrapped in clean, soft linens and utterly blissed-out after the hot-spring –naked in the snow/whipped with branches – hot-spring routine. She'd spent her day the same way, in one of the other pools in the spring, unseen by me.

"Doesn't that bother you?" I asked, as we sipped the light day-ale which was as much as we were allowed to have during the time of Yule austerity. "Ragnar and Eirik are out there having adventures and it's our job to just stay here and make ourselves pretty?"

Paige chuckled a little. "Yeah. I mean, I can't say I've never had those thoughts – men and women are definitely treated differently here – but, I don't know. Do you really want to be sleeping out in the woods tonight?"

"No," I shook my head. "But that's not the point. The point is the men are seen as these all-important people, their thoughts are important – ours don't matter. All that matters is we look good when they get back from their spiritual journeys with full balls."

"That's not it," Paige said, sitting up straighter so she could toss another log onto the fire and check on baby Eirik, who was asleep on the bed beside her. "It's not that their thoughts matter more than ours. I've thought about this, you know. I asked Eirik about it a few times and he just seemed to think I was crazy to even frame it that way. The way he explained it was that it's about necessity."

"Necessity?" I asked, confused. "How is it necessary that the men spend a few nights running around in the woods on drugs?"

"I don't mean that!" Paige replied. "I mean, OK. Where you and I come from, there's enough food, right? We don't have to worry about starving. We also don't have to worry about getting killed, right? Not as a matter of course in our daily lives, anyway. We don't
have to worry about people coming to our house and throwing us out and just taking it, deciding it's their house. But here, they do have to worry about all of that. Everyone does – even the kings and queens. Eirik explained it in survival terms. He said it's not about men being more worthy than women, or vice-versa, it's simply about everyone having a necessary role to play. The women aren't out in the woods tonight because the children and the old people need to be cared for. The grain needs to be ground and the bread needs to be baked."

"OK," I said, still skeptical. "But what's so necessary about the men being out in the forest with the gothi? How does that contribute to survival? Wouldn't it be more useful if they were hunting?"

Eirik began to fuss, then, and Paige lifted him to her breast. "Oh there will be a hunt," she told me. "At the end of this first part of Yule, the men will go on a hunt. The venison will be used for the Yule feasting."

"But what about –" I started, because Paige hadn't explained why the nights with the gothi and the 'foul teas' were necessary. But she saw that I was getting a little heated and held up her free hand.

"Emma, slow down! I'm trying to explain it to you, aren't I? And don't look at me like that, like I've turned into some kind of fifties housewife – this life, here, with the Vikings? It couldn't be farther from that."

I sat back on the furs – Jarl Eirik and Paige's roundhouse was full of what might best be described as day beds. Simple wooden platforms about four feet by two feet, set less than a foot off the ground and cushioned by linen sacks stuffed with straw and then, on top of those, a thick wool blanket and a fur. They were always receiving visitors and they needed somewhere comfortable to put them. "OK," I said, consciously lowering my voice. "I'm just curious. I'm sorry if I got a little loud."

Paige stroked her finger down one of her son's fat cheeks and looked up at me. "The rituals in the woods are just that – rituals, sacred processes. You've only seen a successful Jarl in Ragnar. Hell, I've only seen a successful Jarl in Eirik. I've known only good times. Easy victories. You said the same – that the estate near Caistley fell with ease. But it is not always easy, and no leader is ever confident that he and his people will always be on the winning side. The Jarls are privileged – you've seen it. But it's an exchange. The people agree to allow the Jarl a luxurious roundhouse, confidence in their deference, the power to make decisions and lead men. In turn, they get safety – and the Jarl's get responsibility. If someone dies, it's on Eirik's shoulders – just as it is on Ragnar's if something should befall any one of his people."

My friend was right about that. Ragnar was scarcely older than me, but I'd seen the way he worried if one of his people was sick, or one of his men injured. It wasn't something I understood, because I am from a modern, middle-class family. The only thing I had ever been responsible for was – well, it was very little, if I'm honest. Getting to class on time, I suppose, and even that proved too difficult on an embarrassingly frequent number of days.

"OK," I said to Paige. "I get that. It's so weird, isn't it? How different their lives are – can you imagine anyone we know leading a group the way Eirik and Ragnar do? Deciding
when to sail, where to settle, who to promote to positions of responsibility? I don't think I
know a single man our age who could do it. Back home, I mean – in 2017."

"Me neither," she agreed. "That's what I was going to say about the rituals the men
go through, the preparations for a hunt, the visits to the between-worlds – which is what
Eirik calls them. Even that is about survival, isn't it? Because being a warrior is scary.
There's a good chance you'll die young, and painfully. A good chance you won't see your
children grow up – if you even manage to have any before some grubby stranger shoves
his spear into your belly. So the Vikings – all of them, the whole society – they agree to
venerate the warriors, to give them their due. The gothi helps them get used to the idea
of death, to think of the rewards of an honorable death and a place in the Great Hall in
the next world."

"Damn," I commented, thinking deeply about what Paige was saying. "When you put
it that way, it's almost kind of awful, isn't it? Preparing them for death? The warriors are
our age - some of them even younger!"

"But it has to be that way, that's what Eirik was saying. Everyone has their role, and
nothing works if the people don't fulfill those roles. The children die if their mothers don't
care for them. The society dies if the warriors don't defend it. Eirik doesn't think I'm
dumber than him – actually he constantly says the opposite – but I've never seen even an
ounce of this questioning that you're doing – and that I've done my share of – in him
before."

"I guess they can't afford to question it, can they?" I asked. "It's like you said – there's
work to be done. If no one does it, people die. That's crazy, Paige. Isn't that crazy? I've
never thought about any of this before – about how easy we have it in the
future."

Paige smiled and held up my empty ale cup, raising her eyebrows at me to see if I
wanted more. I nodded and she passed me her sleeping baby so she could pour it.
"You're right," she commented, looking back over her shoulder. "You do have it easier.
But you also have it harder. The tangible parts – the food, the central heating, the cars –
those are easier. But some of the others things, I don't know..."

We talked on into the night, until our heads were nodding with sleep, and then one of
Hildy's girls led me back through the cold winds to the westerly roundhouse so I could
sleep. And before I did, I thought of Ragnar out in the freezing woods, his eyes focused
on seeing the next life, on welcoming it. All my churlish envy was gone after talking and
thinking with Paige. If I felt anything for Ragnar that night it was a kind of admiration
laced with sadness. He was so young, so vital and strong. And the chances of him dying
before he got his first gray hair now seemed so high and so real. Suddenly the bathing in
the hot-springs made sense – I even found myself wanting to go again the next day, and
again until I was allowed to spend my nights with Ragnar once more. He wasn't out with
his warriors and the gothi having fun. He was out learning about what it meant to be a
Jarl, about what it meant to suffer, to sacrifice, maybe even to die before his time. And
when he came back to me, I was going to show him I understood that.
My toes and feet began to develop the white bloodlessness I remembered seeing in my father's feet as a child, during particularly cold winters. Even in my fur and leather boots, with more furs on top of us and huddled together with Eirik and our men in the shelter made by a fallen tree, my feet would simply not warm up.

It was miserable, as those early days of Yule often are for the warriors. Our bellies growled with hunger. In the evenings, when the shadow-eyed gothi would clasp the drinking bowl in both his hands and offer it up to me, sometimes I would retch at the mere smell of the dark liquid within. And then I would drink it – all of us would drink it – and so begin the journey into the place where the stars floated under my feet and the earth over my head.

We didn't speak of it amongst ourselves, as it's not considered a thing to speak to other men about, but I wondered if they saw the same places that I saw – if their nostrils, too, took in the sulfurous scent of the candles and hearths in the Great Hall. I floated above the figures of the warriors who had gone before me, up to a ceiling of such height the men became as small to me as mice, and watched as they took their eternal feast, listening as the songs sung by the living, of their greatness, traveled between the worlds.

I found Eirik at dawn one morning, wild-eyed and jabbering that he'd seen one of his young warriors, lost in a raid not two winters ago.

"He's here!" Eirik said, clutching at me and looking around as if the man was just hidden behind one of the trees. I could see that the gothi's tea still worked its magic on my old friend. "He's not dead! He's here! Help me find him again, Ragnar!"

But the young man was not there, and when the tea's effects wore off Eirik became quiet. We all became quiet. At first I missed Emma, my sweet little foreigner, for the usual reasons men miss women. I missed the sound and warmth of her sigh in my mouth when I brought her to completion. I missed the way it made me feel more a man than anything else to bring her to that state.

But by the end of the time with the gothi, barely having spent any of it in the feasting hall or the roundhouse, and none in Emma's soft embrace, what I most missed was no longer so specific, so focused. The women greeted us at the threshold of the settlement after the last day of early Yule. At least I think the other women were there. All that I
saw, as I ran across the frozen ground with what felt like the very last of my strength, was her.

She stood beside the end of the palisade, her arms stiffly at her sides, as if they did not know what to do with themselves without me to give them purpose. And when I took her soft little face in my hands, and she looked up at me with those eyes brimming with everything that was passing between us, I almost cried.

Combat – even difficult combat – often stokes a man for more. More fighting, more food, more women. Deprivation strips a man away. I remember blinking my eyes, suddenlyterrified that I was back in the woods and that Emma herself was just another one of the tea-visions.

But she wasn't a tea-vision, she was herself. Warm and soft and as real as the earth under my feet.

"Ragnar!" She exclaimed when I collapsed into her arms and buried my face in her sweet-smelling hair. "Ragnar, you're freezing! You're filthy. Are you hungry? Come with me. Come with me now, we'll get you warmed up and washed and fed."

The gothi said that without suffering, there can be no recompense. It's not that I ever doubted him, it's not that I did not know the truth of his words. It's that I didn't feel their truth until that moment with Emma, until she spread her warmth around me like a blanket and led me, stumbling and near-delirious with hunger, back to the roundhouse.

If anyone had seen us they would have thought, there goes the young Jarl Ragnar with his woman. They might have wondered where it was I led her. But I didn't lead Emma anywhere that day – she led me. First, she led me to the feasting hall where some of the other warriors from the early Yule rites sat already, also attended by their women and children, some of the youngest by their parents. And then she helped me to sit down at the table, as my body ached and creaked, and brought me a bowl of rabbit stew.

It sounds the simplest thing in the world, I know. But I swear when I saw the look of concern on her face, and smelled the stew, and felt Emma's arm around my shoulders, I nearly wept again for the gratitude that washed over me.

"Go slowly," she warned, concerned as if for a young child. "If you eat too fast you might get sick."

And so I bent down over my meal and spooned it into my mouth with shaking hands. I tried to heed her advice at first – to go slow – but it tasted so delicious and I was so hungry that I was soon wolfing it down, nodding because my mouth was too full to speak when a serving thrall asked me if I wanted more.

When I had consumed almost four bowls of the stew, and my belly finally felt full, Emma took me again and led me out of the feasting hall. I thought she was taking me back to the westerly roundhouse but she seemed to head towards the heavy gate in the western palisade. When she bid the guards open it and let us through, and pulled me out through them, I balked.

"It's hardly the time for a walk, Emma," I said, leaning down to kiss the top of her head and stopping in my tracks. She tried to pull me but even in my weakness she was no match for my strength.

"Just come with me, Ragnar. Stop being stubborn, come on."
"No, girl. Where are we going? I've had enough of these woods, and enough of the spirits that dwell within them. Take me back to the roundhouse and let me see what's under those furs."

She cocked her head at me and laughed. "I see the stew is already taking effect. But if you think I'm letting you lay a hand on me while you're caked in filth, you've got another thing –"

I pulled her against me, then. "Don't play such games with me, Emma. You forget I've seen the way you look at me when I take you into my arms. Do you think the other women are taking their warriors to the bathing roundhouse before –"

"I don't care what the other women are doing," she replied pertly. "I'm taking you to the hot-spring, because your hair is thick with dirt – I can see leaves in it, Ragnar – leaves! Besides, sometimes a little waiting isn't so bad."

"Mmm," I growled into her neck. "Eirik is probably already at his wife's side, and you see fit to punish me – to drag me out again into the snow where I have already –"

"Come on!" She called, and I went with her, because the truth was I simply enjoyed teasing Emma. I probably would have spent another night in the open winter air if she'd demanded it, helpless as I seemed to be when it came to denying her anything she wished.

At the springs, watching the steam rise off the dark water in the moonlight, Emma caught me hesitating. I'd already noticed she seemed peculiarly unafraid of the between-world beings, but it surprised even me to see her lack of fright there.

"What is it?" She asked, unlacing her wool tunic after laying her fur cape down.

"Aren't you scared?" I replied, gesturing to the spring and the surrounding area. "Do you know what kind of bad spirits are said to live in dark waters?"

Off came her tunic, and her fingers got to work on the layers of linen under-dresses. If she was pretending a lack of fear, she was doing it well. "Bad spirits?" She asked, chuckling. "Ragnar, it's a hot-spring. There aren't any spirits in it. You're not tripping balls anymore, are you? It's –"

"I'm not what?" I started. "I'm not tripping what –"

But I never did get to finish that sentence because that was the moment she managed to get her linens loose enough to pull over her head – which she did. And then she stood there in front of me, allowing the freezing wind to skim over her nakedness and the light from the full Yule moon to pick out the ripe swells of her breasts and the delicate bones of her shoulders before she stepped into the hot-spring and submerged herself with an ecstatic sigh.

Bad spirits or not, a half-moon of starvation and freezing and travel to liminal worlds or not, there is scarcely a stronger power on earth than the need of a man for a woman. A dark flower of lust bloomed in my loins at the sight of my girl and I began to wrestle with my own dressings, bellowing angrily at one point when I could not find the leather strap on one of my boots and then kicking it off in frustration.

When I lowered myself into the water – and Emma's outstretched arms – I let out a low moan of relief. But even as I moved to pull her into my lap, to pull her thighs around my body and guide myself into the place where she was warmer even than the water,
she wriggled away, giggling.
"Not yet! Ragnar, not yet."

It was then I noticed that she had brought with her a small wooden vessel filled with the perfumed soap that was used in the bathing roundhouse, on the higher women.

"Jarl Eirik's camp woman – Hildy – will have you whipped if she sees you stole that," I told her, as she scooped some of it out and rubbed it between her palms. Not that I would have allowed anyone to lay a hand on her, as it is.

"I don't care," she whispered in my ear as she began to rub the soap into my neck and shoulders. "I want you clean. I want you clean and fed and smiling and happy."

Even as I had been making fun of her for wanting me prepared like a ham for the stew-pot, I knew what Emma was doing wasn't really about herself. She would have let me take her back to the roundhouse before we bathed in the hot-spring, if I'd insisted. I wouldn't have had to insist – all it would have taken was a well-placed hand, a certain kind of kiss. No. What Emma was doing was about me. I almost feared, as she lifted one of my arms to rub the soap into every inch, that I might get too used to such treatment.

"What is it?" She asked, seeing the expression on my face. "Why do you look worried all of a sudden? You know bad spirits don't exist, don't you Ragnar?"

"You're wrong about that," I replied, leaning my head back and closing my eyes as she ran her fingers over my scalp, washing the filth of the Yule rite out of my hair. "But no, it's not spirits that trouble me. It's you."

"Oh is it?" Emma smiled playfully, kissing me again on one cheek, and then the other. "What is it, Jarl? Do I touch you too roughly? Would you rather a different girl scrub the dirt out from under your fingernails? Five girls, maybe? Shall I go back to the camp and ask Hildy to –"

I reached up and smacked her bare ass when she briefly climbed out of the spring to fetch something that sat out of reach. "You've grown even bolder without me around this past half-moon," I commented when she shrieked and giggled and fell back into the water. "Haven't you, girl? What will my warriors say when they see how boldly you speak to me? You must be put back in your place – and I daresay, come the morning, that you will be."

Emma came closer to me, allowing her thighs to straddle me, although she still floated too far away to give me any real satisfaction. "You can do whatever you want with me, Ragnar, when we get back to the roundhouse. But first, we must finish here."

And so that's what we did. It seemed to take a very long while – a few times I even found my head slipping back onto the cold rock as my lovely little foreigner pulled my limbs this way and that and made sure every part of me was clean.

"What have you done?" I chuckled sleepily when she announced that she was finished. "I'm as perfumed as a maid on her wedding night."

We didn't get fully dressed before racing back across the frozen ground to the westerly roundhouse, where a fire had been stoked high to warm the air for our arrival, and a small cask of ale and a plate of buttered bread set on a table. Not that either of us took any notice of any of those things.

I dropped Emma's wool tunic, which I had held loosely around my waist to run back to
camp, to the floor and stepped towards her, taking her face in my hands and slipping my

tongue between her lips as all the life-force in my body flowed to my center. Her linen
under-dress, wet and transparent, clung to every single one of her curves, and I knew,
feeling her finally fully against me, that it was not going to be long before I took my

satisfaction.

Not that she tried to slow me – not anymore, not by then. She had missed me just as
much as I'd missed her. Her body opened up under my touch, her muscles loosening and
her mouth falling open when I pulled the under-dress off over her head and pulled her
against me.

The frenzy was instantaneous, each of us like a predator getting that first taste of

warm blood on its tongue. I was as thick and stiff against Emma's soft belly as I had ever
been, aching to feel her slippery warmth around every inch. And she was no less needy,
turning away from me almost at once, pushing her hips up and back, offering herself to me.

I remember putting one hand on her hip, and guiding myself between her slick folds
with the other, each of us gasping when I thrust into her, and then instantly falling into a
quick, desperate rhythm. It was like all the pain and suffering of the past days was
coming to this point, all of it built up and held inside.

Emma was going to draw it out of me, though. I bent my body down over hers, letting
my eyes roll back in my head at the feeling of her underneath me, the way her back
arched with her eagerness to give herself to me.

"Ragnar!" She cried, as her knees threatened to buckle and her fingers clawed
helplessly at the table's rough surface, seeking some purchase in the rough seas of my
overwhelming need for her.

"Emma," I moaned into her back, squeezing one of her breasts as it bounced with my
every thrust and sensing her closeness to the edge. "Emma, Emma, Emma..."

Her entire body stiffened and contorted under me when she came to her ending, as if
she'd lost control of everything except the place deep inside where she pulsed around
me, bringing me to an acute, agonized peak. I took her hips in my hands, knowing my
final thrust was coming, and then burying myself into her with a ragged, howling groan as
my thoughts fled my mind and bliss exploded out of me.

We stayed where we were for a few minutes, panting, letting our souls come to rest.
And when it came time to stand we stumbled apart, laughing, and fell into our fur-laden
bed.

Spent, I fell asleep before I could speak a word. Every part of me was empty,
depleted, drained. And in that state Emma did her woman's work of finishing the rites of
Yule for her man; laying me down to sleep so I could begin the process of rising again,
stronger and wiser than before.

The next morning – if it could even be said to be morning when I finally awoke – I found

that, almost as if by magic, part of my depletion had rebounded during the night. Emma
lay in bed next to me, gazing at me with her eyes the color of a sun-dappled summer forest – a riot of green, brown, the odd flash of amber, moving shadows – and I could see that she had been awake for awhile.

"Have you eaten?" I asked slowly, in the midst of moving from the dream life to the waking life. "Why do you stay in bed with me, Emma? You should eat something, girl."

Soothed by food, warmth, cleanliness and mostly by Emma herself, I was no longer the poor wretch of the previous day. In fact I was at pains to reassure myself that I hadn't asked too much of her somehow, or relied too heavily on her for comfort. She saw it at once and reached out to stroke the hair off my brow.

"Shh," she said quietly. "Slow down, Ragnar. I saw Paige earlier this morning, she says the warriors – and the Jarls – who have been with the gothi for the early Yule are free now, until the feasting days begin in three night's time. You don't need to get up. And you don't need to make a show for me."

"Make a show for you?" I asked, genuinely confused. "What do you mean when you say that, Em?"

"I mean you don't have to make a big production of being busy and important if you're feeling guilty about last night."

She looked so delicious lying there in her linen under-dress, pulled open as it was at the neckline to expose the curve of one of her breasts, her skin like milk. It was difficult to concentrate on the conversation as my manhood stiffened further than it already was. "Guilty?" I asked, reaching out and pushing the fabric up over her legs. "What would I be –"

"I don't know," she told me, looking me seriously in the eyes. "Sometimes men feel uncomfortable if they let you take care of them. Sometimes they feel their masculinity has been questioned."

I smiled and kissed her soft lips, and then kissed them again as she opened herself for me, allowing me to spread her thighs and find the nub of flesh above her opening, the one that made her squirm whenever I touched it. "What kind of 'men' have you been spending your time with?" I asked. "Boys, maybe, if they worry about such things. No, it's not worries about my manhood, sweet Emma. It's worries about you – that somehow I asked too much of you, or that you found me so involved in the things I was missing that I forgot that you, too, had gone without. Either way," I rolled her over onto her back and positioned myself between her legs, "I'm going to make it up to you."

"Rag –"

She started to say my name but she didn't finish, because I pressed my tongue against the place that her hips were guiding me to, even if she hadn't quite realized it yet. Her voice melted into a high-pitched little sigh and her thighs fell the rest of the way open for me.

It's not that there was no rush inside me that morning – for there was always a rush inside me where Emma was concerned – but that I controlled it. I wasn't just going to finish her, I was going to near-finish her. Not once, or twice, or three times but many more. I was going to see her panting and begging, lost in her own desperation, before I mixed the pain of her need with the pleasure of its satisfaction and made her completely,
utterly mine.
Her voice started out steady – high, yes, but even. After the first two times I brought her right to the edge and then backed away at the last second, barely able to look up at her face because I feared seeing how in need she was would destroy my promise to make her wait, some of that steadiness slipped. She began to roll her head from side to side, pausing every now and then to lift it and look down at me, her eyes pleading.
"Please, Ragnar. Please – please."
I enjoyed her begging. I enjoyed it so much I had to stop moving against the furs underneath me, lest I let myself go far too early.
And then I buried my head in her sweetness again, flicking my tongue up and over and around, going faster and firmer until she was flailing her arms, tearing at my hair and lifting her hips up off the bed. Again I pulled away, and that time removed her hands from herself when she reached down to finish what I wouldn't.
"No, Emma," I chided as she chewed her lip and clenched her fists. "No, not yet."
Finally, when I could hardly take it anymore than she could, after I'd wound her up like a tightly coiled rope, I finished her off. She seemed almost hesitant, suspicious that I was going to pull away again. When I didn't she leaned back on the furs, bucking her hips up to me in a frenzy and then screaming, loud and full-throated, when she slipped away into the white sea of sensation. And before the pleasure had finished I pressed my thumb down where my tongue had been, determined to wring everything out of her, and moved up to push my thickness into her swollen, soaking sex.
It had been too much, witnessing her as I had. I spilled myself into her almost at once, moaning hoarsely and clutching the furs in my fists as Emma happily took my tongue between her lips and my essence into her belly.
Shall I say we spent the rest of the day as one does at Yuletide? That we shared a mid-day meal and then a late supper in the feasting hall with the warriors and with our friends? That Emma went with Paige to the woods to cut fresh boughs from the holly trees? We did none of it. We spent it in my roundhouse, naked and at ease, as if the fire beside the bed of furs were the sun and the roundhouse walls the bounds of the world and Emma and I the only people in it.
We lost count of the times we made love – only knowing that it seemed impossible to get enough of each other, and that as soon as one or both of us told ourselves surely, that was all there was, lust would spring up again like water from marshy ground.
And all the while, as Emma gave me her entire body over and over, as if nothing was too much for her if it meant pleasing me, I found myself attended by a strange but growing feeling that somehow, somewhere, part of the girl I was wrapped entirely up in was holding something back.
On the second morning after the end of the early Yule rites, as our bodies were sore and raw and spent and we lay next to each on the furs, laughing at what the people of the camp must have been thinking of the sounds that had been spilling out of the westerly roundhouse for the past two nights, I told Emma that I loved her.
It was not such a shocking thing, as far as I was concerned. Isn't that what happened with love? You found someone who gave you the feeling that you didn't want to be with
anyone so much as you wanted to be with them, someone whose every utterance, every little movement and quirk and thought, was unspeakably fascinating to you, and that was love? It's how I had always heard it described. Before Emma I thought maybe I had loved a few girls. I'd missed some of them, when I wasn't around them. Others may have given me a tiny smidgen of the fascination I now felt for the bold little foreigner, even as I recalled my mother listening to my past descriptions of my feelings and shaking her head.

"No, Ragnar," she would say, smiling to herself and speaking of this girl or that one. "It's not this girl who will take your heart and carry it around in her leather satchel."

And when I asked her how she knew she would say, cryptically and maddeningly, that she just knew — and that when I did love, I would know it, too — it would be that obvious.

And then the day came when it was that obvious. Why would I not have spoken it aloud? It was obvious for Emma, too. She even parted her sweet lips to say it back to me, the words only barely unspoken before she caught them and held them in her throat. And as soon as it happened something inside me just knew that what Eirik warned me of was true.

It was confusing, though, because other things, also seemed true — Emma loved me, I was sure of it. She needed me in the same way I needed her. But she was going to leave. I'd been worried when Eirik spoke of it, and then worried by her avoiding it when I brought it up the first time. But this time, I knew it in my bones.

"Why?" I asked her, my brow furrowing as she lay beside me. Nothing in the world could have pulled me away from Emma. Not a message from my father to come home to the Northlands, not a call to battle, not Odin himself. So what — or who — was it that had such a hold on her?

I didn't have it in me to be angry with her — that was impossible after being as close as a man and a woman can be for the previous two days. But I did have it in me to be sad. She must have seen it in my face before I lay back on the furs because she was sat up, the dreaminess of pre-sleep fading from her eyes.

"Why, what?" She asked, attentive after having seen a cloud flit across the blue sky of my expression.

Part of me didn't want to mention it. It would have been so easy to tell her that she was mistaken, there was no trouble, that she should come back to my arms and lay her head on my chest again. But I'm not the kind of man to slide around important matters in that way, as if failing to speak of them makes them disappear.

"Why do you say nothing when I tell you of my love?" I asked. "You're not entirely here. Or you're here, but your heart hears voices from afar — part of you is elsewhere. How long before you go back to that place?"

She opened her pretty mouth, and then closed it, and opened it again — but no words came out. I didn't need confirmation of Eirik's prediction that Emma would leave, but there it was anyway.

"What I don't understand is why," I told her again. "I see the happiness on your face, girl. I see the contentment — I saw how you had to stop yourself from telling me you loved me. So why must you leave?"

Emma looked away before she answered, and busied her fingers with a leather tie
that held the furs to the bed, twisting and untwisting it over and over. "It's too early to talk about love."

Her voice was low and quiet, I did not quite hear what she said. "What?" I asked and she turned to me quickly then, and her voice was no longer quiet.

"I said it's too early to talk about love!" She replied. "Why would you even say something like that to me, Ragnar? That you 'love' me? What am I supposed to do with –"

"I say it because it's the truth," I told her.

"But you don't!" She laughed, but it was not a soft laugh. "You can't! How can you love someone after knowing them for such a short time? You're just – you're just trying to make me stay with you. And I don't think it's entirely fair."

My girl was no longer on her back, relaxed and open. Now she lay tightly on her side, her arms crossed over her breasts, her eyes still refusing to meet mine. I watched her for a moment, waiting to see if she would break and admit she was playing a trick, being silly. But she did not and so it was my turn to laugh.

"I had taken you more as a woman than a girl," I said. "And now I see you lying there like a very young girl of ten and five, pretending to herself that she feels nothing for this boy or that boy, so that she doesn't have to risk her heart. Why are you lying to me? And if you think you believe what you're saying, why are you lying to yourself? I can see it plain as day how you feel about me, Em –"

"Don't turn this around on me!" She snapped, before I could finish. "You already told me that Eirik said I was leaving – and I know you don't want me to leave. So don't act like this is about anything except you trying to stop me from doing that."

"Girl!" I roared, drawing myself up in the bed, incensed at her childishness. "If I want to stop you from leaving it's as simple as calling my warriors and ordering them to keep you with me. Do you think you would ever escape if I wished otherwise? Voss! Why do you try me in this way, after giving me yourself so sweetly?!

But she wasn't going to give in just because I was angry. If anything I'd just made it worse. She caught my eye then, finally, and whispered her response: "But if you kept me here against my wishes, I would hate you."

"Hate?" I bellowed. "Look who speaks of hate so soon after she had to catch the opposite word on her tongue!"

"But I would," she continued, quietly insistent. "It doesn't erase anything else, it wouldn't make these past couple of days or any of our time together meaningless. It wouldn't even erase how I actually feel about you. But if you kept me prisoner, yes, part of me would hate you. You would be the same if I did it to you, Ragnar, and you know it."

It was too much. She was too much. As perfect as she seemed, as pliant in my arms as any man could wish to hope for, there was a part of Emma that seemed dedicated to testing me. What other woman would dare speak to a Jarl of hate after he had shown her such care, such love, as I had shown her? I rose from our bed and dressed as she lay waiting for me to respond. And when she saw that I wasn't going to respond, that I was in fact going to leave without another word to her, she, too, got to her feet and tried to grab my arm as I was leaving. I pulled it easily away and she stumbled backwards,
having not expected such roughness from me. I paused, just briefly, instantly regretful – but I was too angry. She shouted after me to come back as I strode out of the roundhouse and barked at the guards to make sure she wasn't allowed to leave except to relieve herself – and even then that she should be accompanied.

"She must be watched at all times," I told them, aggrieved. "Such a troublesome woman!"

One of Eirik's men approached me as I stormed – where was I storming to, exactly? I didn't know – across the camp, but I waved him off before he could speak and he bowed his head respectfully, stepping away to let me pass when he saw my face. Soon I was near to the cooking pits, and then to the pens where the livestock were kept during the night, and then to Eirik's roundhouse, where I thought I could hear soft, murmuring voices from within.

A surge of anger at my childhood friend came up as I thought of him in there, his wife in his arms, his heart secure in the knowledge that she was his, entirely his. It wasn't fair to feel such things towards Eirik, and part of me knew it. But I was on a rampage, and anyone who got in my way was going to feel the heat of my anger.

Eventually I found myself on the rocky headland that struck out into the sea on one side of the bay where my ship was tied. A high wind blew in off the water, a touch warmer than it had been for days, and I stood tall in it, facing it down, holding my chin high in greeting.

And then I began to laugh – at myself, and without much mirth. What was I going to do – fight the wind? It seemed only slightly less useless than trying to fight Emma. I didn't even know why I was fighting Emma. I loved her. She loved me. And yet she was filled with dodges, with averted glances and mumbled words. What foul thing was keeping her from giving her whole heart to me? It wasn't a child, as I could see from her body she had no children. A man, then?

Standing on the beach that morning, filled with the righteous anger of a young man unused to hesitation from a woman, I gave the idea of Emma with another man full reign to run wild through my head, as if torturing myself would make anything better. I knew she'd been with men before, that was as it is – virginity was not common past ten and ten in Viking society, whether a girl was married or not – but I hadn't actually thought about it in excruciating detail before. Buffeted by the wind and stung by Emma's refusal to meet my open declaration of love with her own, I began to picture her in another man's arms, whispering in her soft voice in another man's ear that she loved him, that she was his.

It didn't take long for me to work myself up to a real peak of rage and set off back to the westerly roundhouse, to show that girl that she was mine, no one else's, and that she was staying with me – whether she wanted to or not.

When I was almost there I suddenly found myself grabbed from behind and whipped around, my hand already on the hilt of my sword, to see Eirik standing before me.
"Where do you go with such unhappy haste?" He asked, noting my expression and dropping his eyes to where my hand still stood ready to draw my sword.

I pulled the hand away, realizing even in my childish anger that two allied Jarls getting into a swordfight over nothing would be unforgivably stupid.

"It's her!" I told him, running my hands through my hair, almost panting with emotion. "It's that demon woman! She tries me, Eirik – she tries me like no woman has ever tried me before! And the worst of it is, she does it without sorrow, as if it were her right – her right! – to speak to me that way. To me! Her Jarl! How dare –"

A strange expression came over my friend's face at that time. Very briefly, I almost thought he was about to smile. And then he bent his head and sighed and ran his hand over his brow.

"Come to the feasting hall with me, Ragnar. I don't want you rampaging through my camp in this state – you'll just as likely kill anyone who gets in your way and I don't need that kind of trouble."

"I'm not hungry," I told him, although it was a lie. "I need to speak to Emma. I need to make her understand that she is not the queen of – whatever backwards place it is she comes from – and that she's not the queen of – of – me!"

"Come," Eirik said again, placing one arm around my shoulders. "Things often seem less impossible when one has a full belly, my friend. And then we can talk about how very little you care for this impertinent foreign wench."

Was he joking? Was he making fun of me in my torment? I looked at him to see that, yes, he was smiling. But instead of going for my sword again something inside me gave in and I stopped, bending forward and putting my hands on my knees.

"I'm a fool," I told him a few moments later when I was beginning to understand how silly I was being. "Voss, I'm the worst kind of dull-wit. Listen to me. Listen to the idiocy I speak! Listen how I tell you she is not the queen of me, as if I were a child refusing to obey its parents. Gods, don't speak of this to anyone, I beg you. My men would lose their will to heed my commands."

Eirik slapped me on the back as we walked towards the hall, chuckling. "They do have that ability, don't they? Women, I speak of. They have a way of making a man – even a Jarl – into a foot-stomping little boy. Come, friend. We'll drink ale and eat smoked fish and bread and figure out what to do."

A short time later, after eating, Eirik and I sat alone in the feasting hall. "Sometimes I think she's not from the land across the sea," he said, picking his teeth with a length of dry grass. "Paige, I speak of. And your Emma seems to be the same as her, does she not? I've noticed even the smallest things, when I watch the two of them, that are similar. What I mean is that it isn't just their teeth or their skin more flawless than an infant's, it isn't just in appearances. Have you noticed that neither seems to understand when or how to speak to their highers? Paige is a Jarl's wife now, so it's right that she speaks to whom she pleases, and how she pleases. But even before we married she was just like your Emma, as willing to snap at a King as she was a thrall, and just as likely to be incensed by being given an order."

"She says she is not a queen," I replied, "but what you say is right, she acts as if she
were."

"Paige says the same, that she is no one where she comes from. She tells odd stories sometimes as well, often before catching herself and laughing and saying she made it up."

"Odd stories?" I asked, grabbing a piece of straw to clean my own teeth and thinking of something Emma had said the previous day, about the way a series of crop-fields look from the air: 'Like a patchwork blanket of green.' When I'd questioned her on the phrase 'from the air,' not understanding her meaning, she'd changed it to 'from a great height' and when I'd then asked her how she had managed to see fields from a height great enough to cause them to appear as a blanket, she had no real response.

"Well, she seems to know things she shouldn't, for one thing," Eirik replied. "I've caught her correcting the healers before. Of course there is always someone who corrects the healers, but the thing is Paige turns out to be right. And she – I almost hesitate to say it as I don't want you to think me insane – but she sometimes almost seems to know my future plans. Plans I have not spoken to her about. Not three nights ago we lay in bed and she turns to me and warns that it will not always be so easy. 'It will not always be so easy, Eirik,' she says, and when I ask her what she means she speaks of us – of our people – and our presence here, our plans to move inland, to settle."

"Has she overheard your men talking?" I asked, assuming there could be no other explanation.

Eirik shook his head. "No – and I don't speak of specific things. She doesn't know we're raiding an estate before I know it. But she warned me about pushing further into the Kingdom of the East Angles, she told me that the King would need to be appeased or killed, and that – voss, it's difficult to explain! Maybe it's not what she speaks of but how she speaks? As if she knows how these events will turn out, as if she's seen the battles, and the years ahead of us already."

"But how can she?" I wondered aloud, a little shaken by what Eirik was saying because it matched so perfectly with something Emma had said about the children of the East Angles – the 'children's children's children's children and so on,' as she'd described them, 'and even further down the line,' one day thinking of us, the Northmen, as their own people. Like Eirik with Paige, I hadn't understood. I explained to Emma that we were invaders, that the East Angles and the Mercians and the others in this land would never think of us as anything else. But she had just smiled at me and said that maybe, once enough time was past, the descendants of the East Angles would talk of their Northmen as if they were as much a part of the place as their own people.

Eirik shrugged. "I don't know. I don't know. It's so many things like that, though. You meet someone, even a woman from a foreign place, and you assume certain shared experiences and thoughts of life. And yet there are so many little things, so many comments from her that sometimes I get the feeling we aren't the same at all. It's as if she sees things in a whole different way. Even matters as basic as time and distance."

"Yes!" I agreed, sitting up straighter. "I was just thinking of Paige doing the same. She spoke just recently of ten-by-five generations ahead of now, of how they would think back to us, of how the Northmen and the East Angles and the Mercians and all of us
would be no more separate but blended into one kind. Who thinks of such things? And
with such seeming certainty in her tone – as if she weren't speculating but speaking truth,
speaking fact?"

We spoke of our women almost until mid-day, when Hildy came in with her girls to lay
out the bread and cured pork for the afternoon meal and Eirik burst out laughing.
"Look at us!" He exclaimed, pulling me to my feet along with him. "We speak like two
besotted girls! Come, friend, I will bring my advisors to the meeting roundhouse and we
will plan the move inland, and what messages to send back home."
That night, I refused to allow Emma out of the westerly roundhouse to take a place at the high table for the first feasting night of the late Yule season. It was petulant and it made me morose with guilt, but some part of me wanted her punished, wanted her to feel how she had wounded me that morning. I had Hildy send a plate piled high with bread, cheese and dried fruits, but when I returned after the festivities, loosened by dark ale and Yule songs, it sat untouched on the table next to the bed. Emma herself lay curled on top of the furs, her back to me, unmoving. Was she awake? I approached, and placed a gentle hand on her back. She shrank away from my touch.

"Are you not hungry, girl?" I asked, chastised by that simple movement of her body. "Look, I sent you cheese and fruit from the –"

"I would rather have eaten it in the feasting hall," she responded coldly. "And not have it sent to me here as if I were some naughty child being punished for misbehaving."

The fire in the roundhouse was high, and the air warm. Emma wore only her linen under-dress, and it fell tantalizingly over the curve of her waist and the plump roundness of her backside as she lay on the bed. I reached down and adjusted myself under my leathers, almost chuckling at the hold she had over me.

"You are being punished," I told her, sliding onto the bed behind her and pulling her against me. At once, she moved away and rolled over to face me and I saw that her eyes were dark with anger and betrayal.

"For what?"

"Look at you," I chided her. "So incensed! Stop being silly, Emma, and come here. Come here and open your legs for me like you did last night."

I reached out and ran my fingers over one of her nipples, pinching it gently to bring it up to a hard point, but she brushed my hand away. "Ragnar, what do you think you're doing? I'm not joking, you know – I'm not teasing you right now. Don't think you can lock me away in this roundhouse all day and then come back and get a blowjob just because you're the Jarl."

"What? A blow –"

"Never mind!" She cried, rolling over and showing me her back again. "I'm tired. And I'm not hungry. Leave me alone and let me sleep."

"You're not a good liar," I shot back. "You've had all day to sleep, and I know you
haven't eaten a thing. Stop acting like a child and –"

I caught her hand in the air before she could bring it down on my face, and then the other one when she tried that, too.

"It's not funny!" She yelled, when she saw that I was smiling – admittedly mostly from the ale.

"It's a little funny," I told her, because truthfully part of me was enjoying punishing her even more. And even as I smiled and laughed, it was undergirded still by my anger from that morning, when she had refused to admit her feelings for me.

"NO!" She screeched. "It really isn't! I want to leave and you're keeping me prisoner! How funny would it be if you were kept against your will, Ragnar? Would you be laughing then? How is it that you tell me you love me in one breath and then in the next order your guards to keep me here all day? Is that what it means to love someone to you? Because if it is I want you to know I don't want –"

All the mirth was gone out of me by then. I yanked Emma towards me and pulled her face right down close to mine so she couldn't turn away.

"No, you infuriating little thorn in my heel," I whispered sharply, "that is not what I mean by love! You know damn well what I mean by love, and don't pretend otherwise! It means I think of you every waking moment, and then I dream of you when I sleep. It means I feel a weakness to you alone, Emma, a concern for your thoughts about me unlike my concern for anyone else's thoughts. It means this morning, when you refused to say what I know you feel back to me, it felt as if you had pushed a dagger into my heart, without regret or remorse."

We sat, each of our shoulders rising and falling with emotion. When some of the anger seemed to have passed I spoke again, more quietly and slowly and with my head bowed slightly. "I don't understand you, girl. Everything about you tells me how you regard me. The way you reach for me, the way you need me, the look in your eyes when we lie together. I feel it in your touch – I feel it in everything but your words. And then I become angry, because it seems as if you torment me deliberately, as if you toy with me just to show me that you can."

"That's what men always think," she replied, not leaning into my arms like I ached for her to do but lying back on the furs and looking away from me, still wearing that expression of betrayal. "It would be funny if it weren't so predictable. Men always think it's about them. As if we have no other lives except the parts that revolve around you. I thought you might be different. You know, being a Vik – being a Northman – and everything. But you're not. Not at all."

I wanted to shake her. My hands itched to snatch her up by her shoulders and shake her, hard, until all the difficulty was gone out of her. It was a simple matter, as far as I could see. She loved me, and she refused to say it. All she needed to do was explain why. Instead she spoke in that womanly way, as cryptic as a gothi, all insinuations and slippery, indirect points. I thought it might drive me mad if I was forced to listen to too much more of it.

"Everything you say is to avoid answering the one question I want answered," I told her, willing my breath to come slowly. "I ask why you torment me and you speak of other
men rather than giving a straight answer. I grow very weary of it, Emma."

She rolled over on her belly, then, and brought her pale fist down on the furs. When she responded, her back was to me again. I thought of telling her that any normal Jarl, any Jarl who had not fallen under her spell, would have had her whipped for her behavior – but I knew it would somehow just make her believe I was an even bigger monster than she already thought.

"What if I'm not trying to torment you?" She asked, still not looking at me. "What if that's not what I'm trying to do at all? What if the way you look after I make you come makes me happy like nothing else ever has in my life, Ragnar? What if for the first time ever for me it feels like I might be beginning to understand that idea of another person's contentment being my own? And what if I'm as tormented as you are by – circumstances?"

Her voice was soft, tired. I reached out and put my hand on the generous curve of her hip, and she didn't flinch away that time. "If that's true, then I'm truly sorry for being such an ox," I told her. "But Emma, please understand that you won't even tell me what these circumstances are. You mean to leave, if I understand you right, if what Eirik said was true. But I don't see why it has to be that way. I am a Jarl. I have a force of strong men under my command. I also have Jarl Eirik and his men – I know he would fight with me – if it came to that – with whoever it is who pulls you away from me. Is that what you ask of me? Who would take you from me? Who has such power over you, girl?"

Emma was silent for some time. And then she rolled over, putting her hand over mine, and I saw that her eyes shone with emotion. "My family," she said. "My friends. My whole life. They wonder where I am, Ragnar. They drive themselves crazy with worry, they imagine the worst fates for me. I can't leave them to the rest of their lives like that."

The temptation to anger flashed through me again – did this arrogant girl think that the rest of us didn't miss our families? that our families didn't worry for us? – but I let it pass. "It is as it is," I told her gently, drawing a faint smile onto her rosy lips. "My mother and father worry for me, too. All the mothers and fathers and families of my people worry for their sons and daughters abroad. How –"

"But my family don't know I'm abroad," she said insistently. "They don't have any idea where I am. They'll be thinking I just disappeared, and assuming the worst – that I've been kidnapped, raped – murdered. I can't just leave them to live out the rest of their lives in torment – real torment – can I?"

I sat back a little, baffled, trying to figure out if it was really that simple. "Is that it?" I asked her. "You need to get word to your family? I can send word. I can send a man – men – south, wherever you direct, to bring word to your mother and father. I can even send you, if you wish to tell them yourself. That will require men, as the distance and way are unsafe for a woman alone, but if it's what you ask of me then I will see it done. Why did you say nothing before this, Emma? If it's such a straightforward thing –"

"It's not," she whispered. "It's not straightforward at all, unfortunately. I wish it was. You can't send men to protect me. You can't come with me. And if I go, I don't know that I can come back. I think I might not be allowed, it might not be possible. And even if –"

I held up one of my hands to stop her. She was doing it again. She was making
nonsensical statements. "How is that?" I asked, desperately trying to maintain a tone of calm. "What place is there on earth where you can go, and my men and horses and ships cannot? That I cannot? Emma, know that I try not to become angry with you again, but you must see that I do not understand you. If you must go home, my men – and I – will go with you. We have ships, horses, we have fearless hearts. Where is it that you can go but not us?"

One of my girl's soft hands found its way to my cheek just as a tear slid down her own. "I can't tell you, Ragnar. You'll get upset with me again for saying it – there, I see it on your face now, the way your eyes narrow when you're angry. But it's true – I can't tell you. You would think I was crazy."

"I don't think it's true," I replied, as the urge to speak harshly rose in my chest and I pushed it back down. "I think it's an excuse, a way for you to make it my fault that you refuse to –"

"Alright!" She said, sitting up and pulling one of the furs over her shoulders. "Fine. OK, Ragnar. You can't come – and your men can't come – because where I'm from is not the place you think of as this place – as the earth, now. You can't ride your horse to where I'm from, and you can't sail your ships. You could spend your lifetime looking and never find it, even if I described it to you in great detail, even if drew you a map."

She wasn't crazy, I knew that. People who have lost themselves that way – who speak of things that aren't there and imagine persecutions that don't exist – don't behave the way Emma was behaving. She did not seem to see enemies where those who loved her stood. And yet what she was saying – I didn't understand it at all."

"Are you dead?" I asked her, finally. "Have you lost your way to one of the other realms?" I squeezed her hip. "You don't appear a spirit, Emma. You appear a woman, a living woman, as real as me. I know of the other worlds, but not of anyone like us – a man or a woman, living and breathing – who can visit them."

"Yes," she said – and gods help me she was telling the truth, there was no deception in her eyes. "I come from another world. It's the same as this one, in some ways. Would it be too confusing to tell you I didn't even grow up far from here? Less than a half-day's ride, I believe. But it wasn't – well it was here. We shouldn't even be talking about location. It's not about that. It's about time. I grew up in a different time."

"A different – time?" I spoke haltingly, almost completely uncomprehending. "Didn't we all grow up in a different time, Emma? Isn't that what it is to grow up – the passage of time?"

She crawled on top of me then and looked me direct in the eyes. A strange recklessness seemed to have come over her – she was even smiling a little. "I don't mean it like that," she said. "I don't mean ten winters ago or ten and ten winters ago. I mean a thousand winters. More than a thousand – and not 'ago' – not in the past, but the opposite – in the future."

"A thousand winters?" I asked, not even hearing the part about the past or the future, because my mind had stopped itself at 'a thousand winters."

"More than a thousand," she replied, working her hips down against me now and sighing as she felt me growing ready against her. "More than a – than a –"
There's something about the fear of loss that heightens passion. We had spoken of it without rancor for the first time, broached the possibility of her leaving, perhaps forever, and it put my whole self into a conquering mindset. If I could not keep Emma as a prisoner, I would have to make her mine in another way, to show her where she belonged – and who she belonged with. I flipped her over onto her belly and pushed her under-dress up over her smooth thighs and the firm, fleshy hillocks of her rear. She moved underneath me, trying to push herself up, to lift her hips off the furs.

"No," I told her, my voice suddenly hoarse and rough as I held her down. "No, Emma."

A current like lightning passed between us as her sweet struggles brought out an aggression that lurked within me, and an answering yielding within Emma. She cried out when I opened her thighs from behind and entered her desire-slickened sex in one movement, with my hand clasped around the back of her neck to keep her in her place.

I took her like that, squirming underneath me, seeming to protest at first but then giving way, whispering my name, crying my name, giving me what I wanted. I was not too eager as I had been after the early Yuletide period, my balls not so full as to be spilling over, it gave me the time to enjoy Emma's body in the way it called out for.

She put her hands on the bed and turned her head to the side when the rush started to come over her.

"Ragnar," she breathed, trying again to push her hips up, to get more of me for herself. "Ragnar, I –"

I bent down over her and gave it to her harder, deeper, moaning at the feeling of her soft ass against my belly, her perfect warmth enveloping me as if that part of her, her femininity itself, had been made for me alone.

When I felt the threshold approaching, I bent down over her, growling into her ear and thrusting into her hard and fast until the explosion came. And when it did, it was as if my very soul was leaving my body along with my seed, unspooling itself into her warmth. Emma tightened as I roared my pleasure into the back of her neck, and I felt the little spasms around myself then, drawing the last of me out as she gasped and moaned and cried underneath me. And even as it happened, as I was conscious of nothing but the acute pleasure ringing through me, I was thinking on some other level of myself that this was what I needed in life. More than water or bread, more than conquest or power. All of it paled in comparison to what it felt for that girl, that troublesome girl, to give herself to me.

When we lay on the fur afterwards, contented and sleepy, it was almost as if the conversation about the place she was from – and her need to get back there – had never happened. But it had happened. And as sure as I knew that keeping her in the westerly roundhouse – or in any roundhouse – was not a solution, I also knew it was not going to be so simple as letting her go. I glanced down at her face as she dozed on my chest and knew, in that moment, that it was definitely not going to be as simple as that.
Jarl Ragnar allowed me to leave the roundhouse the next day. Alone. I checked behind me to see if any of his men were following me, but no one was there. Had he heard what I was telling him? Even apart from the details of where I was from, and why I needed to return – which I obviously could not blame him for not fully grasping – did he realize that I told the truth when I said that keeping me captive would make me hate him?

I took a meal at mid-morning, alone in the feasting hall, and wondered briefly why it was I felt so sad. Even sadder than I had the night before, when I was kept away from the feast. I got through two of the smoked, kipper-like fish before the reason occurred to me. In the light of day, and no longer held by my hot-headed, possessive Jarl, I no longer had the distraction of my own indignant anger. If I was free to go – and it did feel like he signaling as much – then as soon as we returned to Ragnar's camp I would, with Paige's instructions, find the tree and return to the future.

The future. As I sat chewing heavily buttered bread in the hall, the light from one of the fire-pits flickering in my peripheral vision and the smell of camp all around me, it was almost enough to believe that my previous life had been a kind of dream. How was it possible that in a few days I could be thousands of feet in the air, looking down at the Atlantic on my way back to the place where I now was? How was I to return to the world of mobile phones and the internet and next-day delivery after I'd been with the Vikings?

And even more importantly, what was I going to say when I got there? To my parents, my friends? To the media, who surely had been driven into an even more intense frenzy by my sudden disappearance – which so perfectly mimicked Paige's? To the FBI, who must have themselves been wondering if alien abduction was sounding quite as implausible as they'd first assumed?

I slumped down a little over the table, running one of my fingers through the intricate, swirling pattern that had been carved into its surface and fatigued by the mere thought of what lay ahead of me. And even then, part of me knew that all thoughts of the media and the trip home and the police were, in their own way, just an avoidance of the one thought that stood above all the others: what was I going to do without Ragnar?

It was easy, the previous night, to use my righteous fury at being held in the roundhouse to think of Ragnar as the one whose professed love was leading him to do silly things. He'd said the words aloud, that he loved me. I hadn't. And the reason I hadn't...
is that I'd got it into my stupid head that that somehow left me with the option of not loving him. Which it didn't, of course. It doesn't matter if one speaks the truth or bites one's tongue against it. The sky is blue, whether it's stated aloud or not. The truth is the truth, and the truth was that I loved him back.

He knew it, too. He told me he knew it. So now I wasn't just going home anymore. Now I was leaving Ragnar. I would have started sniveling over my food right there if Hildy hadn't come bursting in and immediately started eyeballing me.

"Has anyone ever told you it's possible to slow down?" I asked her, coughing at the sound of a small wobble in my voice.

"What's that?" She bellowed, raising her chin so she could gaze at me haughtily, as if from a height.

"You never just walk into a place, do you?" I continued. "Like a normal person. No, that's not you. You burst in. You rush in. You appear suddenly, like some kind of sitcom sidekick."

"I'm sure I have no idea what you speak of, you mad girl," Hildy responded casually, tossing another log onto the fire. "Now get out of here, we need to prepare it for the Yule feast tonight. Perhaps you should be softer, then maybe your Jarl would allow you to attend?"

"That's funny," I shot back, getting to my feet and heading to the door where she waited, stamping her foot with impatience. "I mean the part where you're advising me to be softer. That's hilarious. I mean you of all people – I bet your poor husband doesn't get a moment's –"

"OUT!" She shouted, shoving me through the door and then, for good measure, actually kicking me in the butt. I was about to whirl around and – I don't know – tackle her to the ground? – when a male voice interrupted.

"That's enough, Hildy. I won't have any allies left if you beat up all their women."

Jarl Eirik. I turned to face him and we regarded each other with a well-intentioned, wary kind of curiosity. I was Paige's best friend, and he was her husband. I was from the same place she was from, the mysterious country that neither of us quite knew how to speak of or explain, and that had once had a claim on her heart. I could see that the Jarl hadn't quite figured out whether I was a threat to the order of his marriage or not. But I could also see a kindness in his eyes, like maybe he had some idea what difficulties I was going through.

"Jarl Ragnar says you'll sit with us at the high table tonight," he said. "You'll enjoy the Yule feast, it's –"

"Oh does he?" I responded, too loudly and before Eirik was finished. I've always done that, my whole life, when I felt awkward. It was one of the first things Paige noticed about me when we met. You don't seem very English, she'd said, after observing my tendency to become a verbal bull in a china shop.

"Er, yes," Eirik replied, not bothering to hide his mild irritation. "Paige was happy to hear it, as was I. And then after we eat we'll light the wreaths."

I didn't know what 'light the wreaths' meant but I could tell he was just being nice to me because I was Paige's friend, and that he had somewhere to be, so I didn't question
Little food was taken that afternoon, apparently a tradition on the feast days of Yule, so by the time darkness fell and it seemed the entire population had packed itself into the feasting hall, my belly was rumbling with hunger – and I hadn't seen Ragnar all day. I spotted him, already seated at the high table, before he spotted me. He was leaned back in his chair, talking intently to one of his men, who stood behind him in a pose that spoke to the respect he held for his Jarl. I smiled at the sight of them together, and a strange species of pride filled my heart.

Pride? I asked myself. Why would you be proud of someone else having a conversation? It was my usual thing – trying to pooh-pooh my own emotions, make them small and silly in order to dismiss them – but it didn't quite work that time. The feeling snuck up on me, a swelling sense of gratification at seeing Ragnar. It wasn't just me, either – and that was part of it. He was a Jarl, and that meant others treated him as a Jarl. It meant he took their respect and deference as his due.

At first it had seemed a little silly to me, these Vikings and their Jarls, almost as pompous and anachronistic as future-Britain's royal family. But Jarl Ragnar and Jarl Eirik – and, I presumed, the other Viking leaders – were no figureheads. It was my modern mind and way of thinking that blinded me to the very necessary role these men played in their society. Ragnar's people didn't respect and defer to him because of some inherited birthright, or for reasons of traditions or politeness alone. They respected and deferred to him because he was the strongest among them, with the most capable mind for defense, conquest, organization and all the other things a Jarl needed to master in order for his clan to thrive.

I almost felt a little chastised, sitting down next to him as he broke from his conversation to kiss me on the cheek and ask if I was OK. Ragnar wasn't just battle-brave. He was heart-brave too, telling me what he felt without fear of embarrassment. I was the coward on that count, hanging back because I feared the truth and what it meant.

And what was the truth?

Ragnar signaled one of the servers to fill my cup with dark ale and put his hand on the small of my back, observing me, checking to see how I was – not in some showy, dramatic way, but just in that quietly strong way of his, that made me feel so loved, so cozy in the bosom of his affections. I glanced up at him and caught his glacier-blue gaze, thinking to myself that leaving was going to be difficult. Perhaps the most difficult thing I had ever done.

But the feast was no time for sadness – it simply wouldn't have been permitted. We ate until our stomachs groaned for mercy, and then we ate some more. And drank some more. Many speeches were given, most of which seemed to consist of stories from the past year and hopes for the new one, as well as entreaties to the gods to bring a warm summer, healthy crops, victory for the people over the East Angles. I wondered, briefly,
as I listened to the martial words of the Vikings, what anyone back in present-day England would make of my presence there. After all, the conquest the Norsemen spoke of was the conquest of my people, of the place I came from. But by the time I was born, who was to say that most of the people in my part of the UK didn't have Viking blood running in their veins? That they couldn't quite be said to be Angle, or Saxon, or Viking the way those in Ragnar's time could?

Afterwards, when the crowd was boisterous and rosy-cheeked with ale, the gothi and his young helpers led us down to the grassy sand dunes that curved around one side of the beach. Songs were sung – songs I did not know the words to – and more ale was drunk, and I thought that was going to be it. But as the wind carried the words of the last song away I saw that people appeared to be lining up, jostling for a place, closer to where the gothi stood. Paige came up behind me then, with her sleeping baby fastened to her back with linens, and nudged me in the ribs.

"They're burning the wreaths," she whispered in my ear, because the crowd had become quiet by then, watching as the gothi handed a wreath to Jarl Eirik, who dipped it into the flames coming from a small fire-pit and then held it aloft as it sizzled and crackled brightly against the dark sky.

"The sun hides her face from us!" He intoned, loud enough so even those at the back of the gathering could hear. "And births a daughter at this, the darkest time of the year. The eternal cycle turns once more and we ask the gods that this daughter of the sun grow healthy, that she shine her light on the people. Daughter of the sun! The gods make you strong and bright!"

And then, just as the flames were about to reach his hand, Eirik turned and sent the burning wreath tumbling and rolling down the dunes towards the sea. And after him Jarl Ragnar received his own wreath, also set alight and sent spinning down over the grassy dunes. Others followed the Jarls, all holding the wreaths up when they were first lit and bidding the gods to grow the sun's daughter strong and warm, and then rolling them down the dunes to cheers and laughter.

I was so mesmerized by the burning wreaths as they left a trails of glowing embers behind them on their way to the waves that I didn't see Ragnar pushing his way through the crowd towards me.

"Come," he said, when he reached me, and I scarcely had time to look back at Paige before I found myself pulled away.

"It's OK," I protested, sure I was fine observing, rather than participating. "Ragnar, I don't need to –"

"I'll be the one who says what you need, girl."

I laughed. I could easily have gotten angry, or dug my heels into the sand, but what came out of my mouth was a laugh. Ragnar turned when he heard it, flashing a smile that said he knew damn well I could have gotten upset, and that he also knew I just wasn't capable of it at that moment, on that night.

Still, I found myself balking when the gothi handed me one of the wreaths, nodding at me to dip it into the flames.

"Go on, foreigner," one of his female helpers urged me. "You're soon to be one of us,
aren't you? You must learn our ways."

I turned to look at Ragnar, wondering who had informed the girl that I was soon to be one of them, but he just shrugged. Everyone was looking at me. Why was I hesitating?

I was hesitating because, even before the gothi's girl spoke up and made it explicit, some part of me understood that it might not be the best idea for me to travel even further down the path of blending in with these people. But Jarl Ragnar was watching me, and the people were watching us together. They would see it if I defied him, if I refused to light the wreath.

So I did it. I lowered the wreath into the fire and then held it up over my head, flinching away from the sparks that flew up.
"Sun," I started, and then stopped because I'd forgotten how the words went.
"Daughter of the sun," Ragnar whispered.
"Daughter of the sun!" I repeated, louder than him.
"The gods make you strong and bright."
"The gods make you strong and bright!"
"Use your wrist," he instructed, as I moved to send the burning wreath down the dunes. "The further the wreath travels, the better the year will be."

I tried to use my wrist, even though I felt it slightly unfair that I, a burning-wreath-tossing virgin, might be held to the same standards as the Vikings. The burning round of dried twigs and sticks, studded with pinecones and other forest detritus, flew out of my hand and rolled uncertainly down the sand. Before it had gone far it hit a ridge in the sand and wavered, wobbling and threatening to fall over. And when it began its descent into the sand, having traveled not even half as far as the worst performing wreath before it, Ragnar suddenly leapt forward and, to the laughs and cheers of the crowd, lifted it out of the place where it was stuck and nudged it gently on its way again. Everyone watched as it then, slowly but surely, made its way all the way to the water's edge, where it fell with a hiss and a puff of steam into the cold waves.

That night in the westerly roundhouse, as the camp slept and the fire's embers glowed in the dark, Ragnar tossed and turned in his sleep. His restlessness woke me and I lay beside him, watching him worriedly, wondering if I should wake him up. After the Yule rites with the burning wreaths he had taken me back to the roundhouse and made long, slow, proper love to me – until both of our bodies seemed to be made of jelly and we fell asleep in each other's arms. I had not forgotten about the parting to come, not at all, but it was easy to push it aside in my mind when I was next to him, as I was then.

Gently, I placed my palm on one of his burly, muscled shoulders, hoping maybe my touch would calm him. It didn't seem to. And a few seconds later his eyes suddenly flew open and he started looking blindly around the room, and at me, the way you do when suddenly woken from a dream.
"Where – ?" He started, his voice thick and groggy. "What am – Emma? Emma, oh, it's you. I –"
"Were you dreaming?" I asked, kissing his sweaty brow soothingly and rubbing his back when he sat up.

"Yes," he replied. "Yes, I – I think I was. I was in the forest – not this forest, outside the camp. And not the forest where I grew up. Some other forest. It was dark, the middle of a night – and with no moon. I was on a horse and it was – it was so quiet. I couldn't even hear the horse's hooves."

I leaned in and kissed his shoulder, still trying to ease him back to sleep. But he was perturbed, almost fully awake.

"I could hear hounds, though. That was the only sound. A hound barking loud and then another, quieter." He paused, and looked at me wide-eyed.

"What is it?" I asked, confused by his reaction. "What do you think–"

"Odin's hunt," he whispered. "It was Odin's hunt, Emma. The first time I've dreamt of it myself. But it is as it is, the dark woods, the sound of a hound – and then another, not as loud as the first. It's a sign."

"A sign of what?" I replied, as a little shiver ran up my back – how easy it was to get sucked into the superstitions of other people, when those other people took them seriously!

Ragnar shook his head. "War. Conflict. A change in circumstance, or a change in the weather."

"So anything, you mean?"

He turned sharply towards me. "It's not a light matter, girl. My first dream of the wild hunt, and in a foreign land – in another Jarl's camp to plan the conquest of the land. I must speak to Eirik about this. I must –" he got out of bed and began to dress.

"Ragnar," I implored, trying to take his hand and pull him back to bed. "It's not yet dawn, do you think Jarl Eirik wants you to wake him up–"

"Girl!" He shouted, yanking his hand away. "I dream of Odin's hounds in a dark wood, and you bid me back to sleep? You lay your head back down on the furs, I have to speak to Eirik about this before it fades."

I tried once more to get him to stay, to talk sense into him, but he was dressed and out of the roundhouse within minutes. I crawled out of the cozy cocoon of furs to throw more wood on the fire and then got back in, falling into my own restless sleep until the light of the morning seeping in from outside got me up.

"We sail south after the last Yule feast," Ragnar announced that afternoon, when he found me in the roundhouse with Paige and baby Eirik, talking in low voices about my plans. She'd given me clear instructions on how to find my way back to the tree, involving finding the path from the beach. I was to walk south down the beach until I spotted it, not head straight into the woods that surrounded the camp, as I had done on that first night. She thought it unlikely I would miss it.

Paige and I looked up at the Jarl. "Did you hear me? We sail south. Word goes across the sea to the Northlands, to the other Jarls, to the chieftains of the people. When the
summer comes, many more arrive on these shores, and we move inland."

How strange it was to hear, in real time, of the Viking plans to invade and settle Britain after having read up on the subject. They would be successful in their conquest, too – and for many years. They would leave a mark on the land and the language and the people that ran so deep it became a part of the place itself.

The final feasts of Yule took place, but I felt that both Eirik and Ragnar had already moved beyond Yule, in their own minds. They took their seats at the high table and participated in the rites only because it was expected of them. But both of them moved and spoke with a new urgency, a rush to get on with things, a wish for the sun to do her job and bring about the thaw that would mark the start of the Viking plans.

I waited on the beach on the day of our leaving, watching as supplies were loaded onto Ragnar's ship and then, when it came time for me to be loaded, clinging to Paige as she put her arms around me and we cried.

"I don't know if I can do it," I whispered in her ear. "I don't know if I'm strong enough to live without – him. Without you – and with knowing about this place."

She pulled back and clasped her hands around my face, looking me straight in the eye. "You're stronger than you think, Emma. I know the pain you're feeling. I know it won't go away until you see your family again. You know where to find the path to the tree. Go. Keep me in your heart, as I'll keep you in mine."

"You're even starting to talk like them," I laughed through my tears.

Paige kissed my cheek, then, and one of Ragnar's men led me thigh-deep into the sea before others hauled me aboard the Viking ship. And then I stood in my wet tunic as we sailed away, refusing a fur and refusing to hunker down out of the wind before Paige and the beach were out of sight.

Ragnar watched me as I did these things. He didn't watch me obviously, and when I say 'watch' I don't mean he did it only with his eyes. His eyes were occupied with navigation. But he kept a small part of his attention aside, to focus it on me. I felt it. I knew what it was about, too. We were heading back to the place where he'd first taken me, and back to the place where, he presumed, I might be able to find my way home. And although we seemed now, perhaps, to have an agreement that I was not a prisoner, I understood that the agreement had not yet been tested. Both of us, I suspected, and in our own ways, were grimly anticipating that test.
The journey south had a different mood to the one that had taken place a few weeks before it, when we headed north. Gone was the happy expectation of seeing a long-lost friend, and of allowing the woman I came to love the same pleasure. Gone was the lazy warmth of Yule, always the least busy time of year, and all the attendant goodwill and closeness with the people.

Not that I was unhappy, heading south. I was just crowded. Crowded with thoughts, with worries and plans. A small gathering of ships would be leaving Eirik's camp before the next moon, returning across the gray winter seas to our homeland, summoning the Jarls and the warriors to an invasion unlike anything we had undertaken in the green isles before. As I cast my eyes over the water, looking for signs of incoming bad weather, I also took in my men. Young, strong, and smiling even in the cold wind. Before the next Yule, some of them would be dead. Perhaps many. It was my responsibility to see that they were ready, that they were hungry for the coming conquest. And what better way to train for combat than to engage in combat? The raids would need to picked up in pace.

And then there was her. My eyes fell upon her chestnut colored head even as I tried to keep them away. Seasick, she stood leaning over the shields that ran the length of the ship, pulling her hair off her face as the winds blew it repeatedly back. Whoever her people were, they were not the seafaring kind.

Or maybe her sickness was a mother's sickness? Maybe she already carried my son or my daughter there, within her belly? I wanted to go to her then, to wipe her mouth and offer her some comfort. But I didn't. It wasn't just because my men were without their own women, even as I told myself it was. Emma wasn't like the Northern women. She didn't seem to be like the East Anglian women, either. There was a steel inside her, like the blade of a sword. You can wrap a sword in lambskin, in shearling and furs. You can tie it with leathers and fasten spring flowers into the ties. But it is still, under the pretty, swaddling softness, a sword. The women I knew as a younger man didn't have that sharp edge sewn into them – or if they did, I had been too young and stupid to see it. Emma did. It was, I suspected, part of why I loved her. She seemed to know herself, to know what it was she wanted.

And yet it was also this that made me wary, that sent little flashes of uncertainty through my heart. The quick-witted little foreigner loved me. She needed me. She even
looked up to me in that way that women do, their admiration filling men's chests with the bravado they need to carry out their duties. I caught her doing it all the time, even as she thought she hid it from me. But like the sword wrapped in soft leather and fur, I wasn't sure that she wasn't going to set aside her softness and slice me open. I couldn't keep her against her will, she was plainly right about that. No woman of worth would submit to such a thing, and no woman of worth would be able to look with eyes unclouded by disappointment upon a man who needed to do such a thing.

"Jarl!"
I shook my head free of the thoughts of Emma and took notice of the rocky headland pushing out into the water, before directing the oars to carry the ship further out into the choppy sea.

We sailed for a day and a night and then part of a day again, with the wind against us. And after the camp had welcomed back its Jarl and a portion of its warriors, we all retreated to our roundhouses to sleep for many hours.

I awoke suddenly, in the darkness of night, and with a hollow in my belly. Had I eaten something rotten? No. It wasn't anything I had taken by mouth. It was the empty space on the furs beside me, an absence. Emma. I threw the furs off me and leapt to my feet, my heart beginning to pound.

"Emma!"
"Yes?"

Gods, she was right beside me, unseen in the dark. "Where – girl, what are you doing? Where have you –"

"Ragnar," she whispered, sliding in under the furs next to me so I could feel her body was cold from being out of bed for awhile. "I needed to relieve myself. Shhh. I'm back now. Go back to sleep."

I did go back to sleep, but only after locking one of my arms around her midsection and pulling her back against me.

When we woke, her head was on my chest and her hair falling over me. She turned her face up and studied me silently for a moment.

"What do you look at so intently?" I asked, twining my fingers through hers, luxuriating in her presence and anticipating the soft sighs I would soon be drawing from her lips.

"You," she told me. "You kept turning over in your sleep. Did you dream of the dogs in the forest again?"

"No," I replied. "I did not dream last night, girl. There is not room inside me for dreams right now, waking life is enough."

"Because of the invasion?"

I nodded and maneuvered her more fully onto me, pulling her thighs down on either side of my hips until her eyes closed just a little when she felt my excitement through her linens.
"Yes, Emma. Because of the invasion. There is so much to do, so many tasks to see to."

She put one hand on my chest and began to rock herself against me. "Why do you need to invade?" She asked, and my heart beat strong in my chest to hear the tone in her voice. "Don't you have enough room back in – back in the North?"

"We have plenty of room," I told her, drawing her under-dress up over her knees, and then her thighs. "Not all of it is good for crops, or fit for keeping animals. It is a natural thing for a people to expand, to conquer. It is right to wish to see your numbers multiply."

"Is it?" She gasped as she felt me between her legs and threw her head back when I pushed my hips up against her. "Is – is it?"

I put my hands on Emma's hips and turned her over, so she was suddenly underneath me, her eyes as wide open as her legs. And when I gave her what she wanted she made a little high-pitched noise that brought a twitch of pleasure to the full length of me. I bent down close to her face to kiss her neck and her soft cheeks and then her mouth.

"Do your people sue for peace at every opportunity?" I asked. "How do they survive? How do they hold off invaders if –"

"Ragnar!" Emma squeaked as I thrust down, hard. Watching her struggle to compose herself was as arousing a thing as I have ever seen. Her long fingers curled into the sheepskin she lay on and her mouth fell open. "I – where I come from we're – we're allies with the most powerful land there is. The most powerful there has ever...been...ohhh!"

The conversation was going to have to wait. Emma pushed herself up off the furs so I felt her body, her full breasts and her belly against me. Her kisses were weak with hunger, and the weakness in her own limbs was answered with a growing strength in my own, a heightening. I quickened my movements, guiding her like a ship on rough seas, showing her the way as she lay back underneath me, trusting that I was more than up to the task.

When she reached her peak, instead of burying her face in my shoulder or turning it to and fro as she lost herself, Emma looked at me. Her eyes held mine so I could see every flicker of sweetness, every little jolt and shudder written across them like the weather written on the sky. It brought me along very fast to see her that way, and when I could no longer hold back she held my face in her hands and took me in almost as a wife takes in a husband who is about to leave on a long journey.

I lay back when we were finished, panting on the furs and almost slipping back into sleep. Emma threw an arm over my chest and I ran my fingers up and down it from wrist to shoulder, over and over, marveling still at the flawlessness of her skin.

"Are you hungry?" She asked a short time later. "I will go to the feasting hall and bring back buttered bread and ale, we can take our breakfast in bed."

I reached out when she slipped out of bed, grabbing at her thighs, her buttocks, her belly and laughing as she protested. "Stop! I'll never get out of here if you don't keep your hands to yourself. And then you'll never get that bread and ale."

So I watched her dress, struggling to keep my eyes open, and then fell into a doze as soon as she was gone.
When I woke, I was confused. I was alone in the roundhouse, and the light coming through the skins was bright. How long had I been asleep? A quick glance around showed no plate of buttered bread, no cups of ale. I sat up and tried to orient myself in the day. It was much lighter than it should have been, if I'd only slept for a few minutes, and if Emma was still at the feasting hall to collect our breakfast.

I thought, then, of the way she'd looked at me when we were making love. That look in her eyes, as if I were about to leave for many moons. Perhaps she had been looking at me because she was about to leave?

"Fiske!" I shouted, as a feeling of dread seized my belly. How long had I slept? How stupid had I been to let her walk freely about the camp, to imagine that somehow it was the noble thing to do? "FISKE!"

A head poked through the leather flap – not Fiske – and I bellowed at the guard to find Fiske, and to find Emma, at once.

I threw on my dressings and ran out of the roundhouse, as a commotion started up outside, a reaction to my yelling.

"Where is she?" I shouted at the first man close enough to grab by the scruff of his neck. "WHERE IS SHE?!

"Jarl, Jarl – "

Fiske. With Arva on his heels.

"We thought she was with you, Jarl," Arva said, as the small crowd gathered around me turned their heads to and fro, as if Emma must have been standing behind one of us, only temporarily hidden. "We thought she was in the round –"

"No! She left to find bread and ale for me, and she hasn't returned. I fear she's –"

Fiske didn't wait for me to finish my sentence. He turned and began to run in the direction of the feasting hall as the rest of the guards looked to me.

"Perhaps she's still there?" Arva suggested, and I found myself wanting desperately to believe her, even as something in the marrow of my bones told me not to. "If she went to fetch bread and ale, she will be back soon with bread and ale, won't she?"

But it was still too light, I still had the feeling that I had slept for longer than I intended after our morning exertions. And before I could snap at Arva, Fiske returned leading my horse by the reins and breathing heavily.

"She's not there, Jarl. She's – one of the cooking thralls said she thought she saw her earlier, walking outside the – outside the camp. I brought your horse, Jarl. The men and I will saddle ours and follow –"

But I didn't hear the rest of what Fiske was saying because I was already pulling myself up onto the horse and burying my heels in its sides, heading off towards the woods outside camp.

"We're right behind you!" One of my men shouted as I ducked under a branch and galloped down the path we had followed on our way back from the estate. My eyes roved over the land, not just looking for Emma but looking for signs of Emma – whatever those would be. There was a deep panic in my chest, unlike any I had ever experienced before,
She can't be gone. She can't be. She loves me. We'll find her somewhere silly, in the camp, fetching more pork from the storehouse.

Fiske and a couple of guards caught up with me later, after I'd covered more ground than Emma could have covered on foot between our encampment and the estate. And he didn't have to tell me they hadn't found her, because I could see it on his face.

"We should split up," I said, breathing hard. "You – you continue on this path, search the area around the ruined village. I'll go to the beach and look there. Take the guards with you."

The sound of the horses hooves filled my ears as we galloped back down towards the beach. I brought my mount to a half when we reached it, looking north and south, following the coastline with my eyes, seeking movement. None. Not north or south. A hot flash of fear and anger filled me. She would be whipped when I found her, for distressing her Jarl, for taking his mind away from important matters.

And even as I indulged myself in fantasies of how she would be punished, I could have wept for helplessness, and for the fact that I just knew she may already be gone for good. I turned the horse south and cantered along the path at the top of the beach, before coming to a path that led back into the woods. I followed it, intending to turn back to the north when possible and meet back up with my men, for a short distance and then something up ahead caught my eye. It was a windy, sunny day, and the sun cast moving shadows on the frosty ground as the wind tore at the bare tree branches. But I'd seen something. At least I thought I had. A flicker of linen, was it? Disappearing around a corner? I drove the horse to a gallop again and bellowed into the silent winter air:

"Emma? Emma! EMMA!"

And then I came to a stop once I had rounded the corner, pulling the horse up hard because I thought I'd heard something. And yes, I had. An animal – a pig, perhaps – was crashing through the undergrowth. I looked around, trying to locate the direction from which the sound came and realized the sound was too much to be one of the little red pigs the East Angles raised. A deer, then? No, the sound was too clumsy. It was her.

"EMMA!" I shouted again, dismounting my horse and sweeping the undergrowth blindly out of my way in the direction I thought the sounds were coming from "Emma I know you hear me! Stop this at once! I'm warning you, girl, I'll have you –"

And then there she was, not the length of one of our smallest ships away, her little face peering at me from behind a bush. I stumbled forward, yelling as my sword caught on the vegetation, my blood surging with the anticipation of getting my hands on her, of having her in my arms again. I looked down and spotted the hem of her tunic next to the ground. Thank the gods. Thank the gods.

And then when I went to thrust my hands into under the bush and drag her out, they clasped nothing but the cold air. I used my body to shove the undergrowth aside and stood, uncomprehending, as I looked down at... nothing.

There was nothing there. No sign of her. It was impossible. I turned, sweeping branches aside as my eyes darted from one spot to another. All to no avail. She wasn't there. I stood dead still to see if I could hear the sounds of movement again but there
was nothing to hear, either. Just the wind in the woods and the horse's breathing.

But it couldn't be. I'd seen her. Her face. I'd seen her tunic almost within touching distance of my hand.

So where was she?

I began to lurch through the woods, kicking at stumps and ripping small bushes straight from the earth, raging and shouting Emma's name over and over. That's how Fiske knew where to find me. He followed me off the path and had to near shout my name directly into my ear to get me to listen.

"She was here!" I said, turning and taking him by the shoulders. "I saw her. I saw her face. She was right here!"
I remained, for the whole journey back to the tree from Ragnar's arms, half-convinced I was dreaming. I wasn't really leaving him there, was I? The best man I'd ever met? The man who had openly declared his love for me?

I was. And I knew if I thought about it too much, I wouldn't be able to do it. So I blundered along as fast as I could, down through the woods outside camp to the beach and then south along the coast, peering constantly back over my shoulder to see if I was being followed and sobbing openly the whole way.

The first path I followed from the beach, heading east back through the woods, turned out to be the wrong one. It led me to the site of the ruined village and wasted a lot of precious time. Instead of randomly choosing another path from there I headed back to the beach, determined to stick to Paige's instructions so I didn't get lost again.

When I found another path inland, I hurried down it, increasingly paranoid that my absence would have been noted by then, and not at all confident that Ragnar would let me go. And it was on this path that I heard hoof-beats behind me, seemingly distant at first and then quickly, terrifying close. It had to be Ragnar – or one of this men. I began to run, tripping over roots that crossed the path and getting my hair caught on the thin, leafless winter branches that obscured my way. All the while I had to keep a lookout for it – the tree.

The horse and its rider were almost upon me when I spotted it just off the path – my way home – and dove into the undergrowth at the last second. I thought about whether or not to stay still and pray that the rider didn't see me, but I was so close to home I just went for it. Which could have turned out to be a rather big mistake, because the rider – who I soon saw was Ragnar – heard me thrashing around like an elephant and dismounted his horse.

We made very brief eye contact before I left. He saw me, and I saw him. He looked panicked and angry. He also looked – and this was the part that led me to hesitate for so long he almost managed to grab me – betrayed. I still don't know how I managed to close my eyes and turn my head away from him – but I did. Even as fresh tears sprang from my eyes and a sob heaved out of my throat, I pressed my bare hands against one of the tree's gnarled roots and found myself, after a brief moment of rushing darkness, blinking and spluttering in the woods in the middle of the Renner's property.
I lay on the ground for a minute or two, not quite believing I truly was back home in the present, but soon got to my feet. There was no time to relax – I had to get inside. I had to get somewhere I could change my clothes, wrap a scarf around my neck and draw it up over my face. Most of the people in America knew my face before I went missing – surely they knew it even better after I'd been missing for a month.

Twenty minutes later, after crossing back over the field towards where I'd parked my car, I saw that it wasn't there any longer. Of course. Panting with effort and nerves, I turned around and headed back into the woods and through the Renner's backyard. I listened, and then slowly made my way along the side of the house before peering around to the front, but I didn't see or hear anyone. Good. At the back again, I took aim at the door that led into the garage and managed to knock it off its hinges with four or five well-placed kicks. The door into the house from there was unlocked and I rushed inside, managing to make it as far as the dusty couch in the living room before collapsing onto it and unleashing the emotions I'd been struggling to hold back ever since I'd left Ragnar's side that morning.

"I'm sorry," I wept into a pillow, repeating the words over and over. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

When I could breathe evenly again, I got up and flipped on a light. The place still had power. Then I walked into the kitchen and tried the ancient landline phone on the wall. A dial tone, as sweet a sound as a chorus of angels, buzzed in my ear and I smiled with relief as I dialed my parent's home number. Only seconds now. Seconds until they heard my voice, until I could tell them I was safe, I was OK, I was home.

But no one picked up the phone. And the voicemail message, when it came on, had been changed. My father's voice came down the line, somber and tired:

"You've reached the Willises. If you're with the media, please contact our lawyer. We're in America as of December 22nd, so everyone else can reach us on our mobiles. Anyone with any information on our daughter, Emma Willis, please ring 9-1-1 if you're in America or 9-9-9 if you're in the UK and you have any information, no matter how insignificant it may seem, that could help us find her."

Hearing that message made it feel as if someone had scooped out my heart and thrown it into ice-water. My father, normally so take-charge and upbeat, sounded broken. He sounded half-asleep. Their mobiles. I had to call their mobile phones. Except I didn't have my phone anymore and I didn't know their numbers without it. I reached out to take the landline off the hook again, intending to call the police, and then stopped just before doing so.

Wait. Just wait a second, Emma. You haven't thought about any of this, have you? You haven't actually made a plan. Remember what happened to Paige.

My hand fell back to my side. No, I wouldn't call the police. I needed to find out where my parents were, and I needed to contact them. And I needed to do all of this without it getting out that I was back. Because if it got out, who could predict what was going to
Unfortunately, the internet connection at the Renner's house had been cut off. I went upstairs to Paige's room to get changed into normal, 21st century clothes and think about what I was going to do. I had to get online. But how was I going to get anywhere? I didn't have any money, because I'd left my wallet in the car. The car that was probably sitting in a police impound lot.

My lawyer. Michael Rappini. I could call the operator and get his office number. Which is exactly what I did after I'd put some of Paige's clothes on.

"Michael Rappini."
"Uh –" I said, pausing, swallowing. "Um –"
"Is everything alright, ma'am? My secretary said you didn't want to give a –"
"It's Emma," I whispered, desperately hoping I was doing the right thing. "Emma Willis. It's OK, I'm not –"
"Emma Willis?!
"Yes, it's me –"
"Emma! Are you – where are you? Have you called the p–"
"No!" I shouted. "No, Michael, please do not call the police! I'm OK. I'm fine. I'm not kidnapped, no one is holding me, I don't need rescuing. What I need is – I need you to listen to me. Please."

"Uh," my lawyer replied, sounding shocked. "Sure – uh, sure. Yes, of course Emma. But you're – are you sure you're OK? Is someone with you right now? Just answer yes or –"

"No, I'm alone. I'm at Paige Renner's house. I need to –"
"You're – wait, you're where? Paige Renner's house?! Emma that place is crawling with cops, what are you doing there?"

A shiver of anxiety ran up my spine at the phrase 'crawling with cops' but I tried to will it away, remembering that I hadn't seen anyone outside – nor had I done anything wrong.

Yeah but you didn't look that thoroughly, did you? And Paige Renner didn't do anything wrong, either, and look what they did to her.

'I'm – I didn't see anyone. I didn't see anyone outside. And they took my car so I –"
"I'll come get you. I'll come get you right now."

"I need to talk to my parents!" I told him. "Please, I don't want anyone to know I'm back until I speak to them. I don't want to talk to the police, either, I don't want them to drag me off to the psych ward like they did with Paige. I just need my mum's mobile number. Or my dad's. You must have –"

"Emma," Michael cut in. "Slow down. Let me come pick you up. I won't call anyone – I'm still you're lawyer, remember? It was smart to call me. But you shouldn't be there. If the police aren't there now, they could be at any time. The Renner property is pretty much the central physical point of the whole investigation. And hell, if the cops aren't around that doesn't mean the 'internet investigators' aren't there."

"The what?" I asked.

"The internet investigators," he replied, as I heard the sound of him gathering his
things and closing his office door behind him. "You know, crazy people. Looking for scorch marks from alien landing craft in the backyard, that kind of thing. Wait. You weren't kidnapped by aliens for real, were you?"

"No," I laughed, thankful for the brief moment of levity.

"That's good to hear. Now, I'm just leaving my office now. I'll be there in – let's say half an hour. Don't come rushing out when you see the car, I want to take a good look around the place first, OK? Make sure the coast is clear."

"OK."

"And Emma?"

"Yeah?"

"Your parents are going to be so happy to hear from you. It's wonderful to hear you sounding safe and well. I'll see you soon."

"OK," I whispered, emotional again. "Yes, see you soon."

True to his word, Michael Rappini pulled into the driveway, slowly and with his headlights off, a short time later. He spent about five minutes checking the front and back yards, checking around the house for any unwelcome visitors, and then he knocked quietly on the front door. I pulled it open right away and he came inside, looking around to make sure the drapes were all closed before finally, when he was satisfied that we couldn't be seen from outside, putting his hands on my shoulders and just staring at me, disbelieving.

"It's really you, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I replied.

My lawyer shook his head and looked away. "I didn't think I was ever going to see you again, Emma Wallis. To be perfectly honest, I don't think anyone did. And now that you're back, we need to have a very serious discussion about how this is going to be handled. Because people are going to lose it when they find out."

We sat down on the battered sofa in the Renner's living room and I told Michael that what I wanted, before anything else, was to call my family. To let them know I was alive and well.

"Sure," he agreed. "Of course. You can do that, but we – Emma, we really need to have a plan. Your parents – and your sister – are both here, in River Falls, and they're working closely with the police. Which is as it should be. But the minute the police find out you're back, the press is going to find out, and then everyone is going to find out. Also, they're going to want to debrief you, and I can tell you now that won't be a short process. They –"

"I just need to talk to my family!" I told him. "If I ask them not to say anything right away, they'll listen to me, I know they will."

Michael Rappini's instincts – unlike my own – were correct. He'd been witness to the media frenzy since I'd gone missing, he knew what I and my family were in for when it came out that I was home, and he was trying to get me to agree to formulate a plan of action regarding how to best handle everything. I, on the other hand, was solely focused
on one thing to the exclusion of all else: seeing my family again, making sure they didn't spend another second worrying about me.

"Do you remember what happened to your friend?" He asked gently. "It's worse than that now, Emma. You wouldn't believe the –"

"Please," I cut in. "I just need to talk to my parents. Just for five minutes. They won't say anything if I ask them not to."

"It's not that simple, Emma. It's not as simple as will they say anything or won't they – there are police and reporters around them almost all the time, your family loves you but they have no experience in dealing with –"

Both of our heads suddenly snapped up at the sound of a loud knock on the front door. I shook my head 'no' when Michael looked at me enquiringly, to check if I was expecting anyone else.

"Shit," he whispered. "OK. Shit. That'll be the –"

"Hello?" A voice – male – came through the door. "Mr. Rappini? Michael Rappini? We saw you go into the house, we know you're in there. I'm Jim Forslund from KANB-5 News, can I ask you a few –"

"Go upstairs," Michael whispered to me. Go upstairs and don't come down until I tell you it's safe.

"But what if he comes in?" I whispered back, already feeling cornered – by a single reporter – because I was so clueless about what was coming.

"He can't come in. Let me get rid of him. It'll just take a minute."

So I went upstairs. Well, I didn't go upstairs. I hid just out of sight at the bottom of them and waited, listening, as my lawyer opened the door and politely asked the reporter to leave.

"We heard a conversation," Jim from KANB-5 News said, as the light from the camera filled the living room.

"Phone call," Michael told him. "I've got nothing to say to you, Jim. I –"

"It wasn't a phone call. We heard a female voice, too. Who else is here with you? Is it Paige Renner or Emma Willis? Is it –"

"Who were you talking to, Mr. Rappini?" a new voice cut in, female this time, and the sounds of an argument came from the direction of the front door.

"Get out of here Jeanine, you've got your microphone halfway up my ass."

"I have just as much right to be here as you do, Jim! Now, Mr. Rappini –"

The front door slammed shut and Michael appeared in front of me, a worried look on his face. That scared me, because he wasn't the type to worry.

"We have to leave," he said hurriedly, under his breath so the reporters outside wouldn't hear us. "We need to leave right now, Emma."

"But – where to?" I asked. "You said they couldn't come inside, right? So –"

My lawyer took out his phone and checked the time. Then he looked up at me. "It's ten past two. I'd say we have until about three until the entire street – not the driveway, the street – is full of media trucks and reporters and crazy people."

As he was speaking, the sound of tires squealing came from outside, lending the scene an even greater sense of urgency.
"OK," I said. "OK – but they're right out there. Should we go out the back and cross the field? You could call a taxi to pick us up on –"

"No," Michael replied, looking around, seeing a blanket and hastily throwing it over my head. "No, that won't work. Come on, Emma. Now. We have to go now."

So I let Michael guide me out the front door, keeping my gaze fixed on the ground, which I could just about see if I looked straight down from underneath the blanket. Both reporters and their camera men immediately swarmed us, shouting questions at Michael and me, asking me who I was, asking me why I was covered up, if I knew where Paige Renner or Emma Willis were – if I was Paige Renner or Emma Willis.

I kept quiet, but the walk to the car, which must have taken less than half a minute, seemed to take forever. I heard Michael opening the passenger side door and at the very last moment, just as I was lowering myself into the seat, someone grabbed the blanket and tried to pull it off me.

"HEY!" Michael shouted, and I heard a scuffle break out. "Back off. What the – what the fuck are you doing? Jim! BACK OFF!"

I grabbed at the blanket and tried to pull it back, to wrap it tighter around my head. I heard Michael's hasty footsteps as he ran back around to the driver's side of the car and opened his door. And then, at the very last second before the engine roared to life, the blanket slipped off my head. Just a little, I thought. I used my hand to block the view of my lower face but there had been a second – less than a second – where part of my cheek and neck had been visible. And Michael saw it happen.

"Keep that over your head!" He yelled, peeling out of the Renner's driveway and accelerating down the road. "Emma – just – keep it over your head! Did it fall off? Did they see you?"

"I don't know!" I replied. "I can't tell!"

He took the first left and gunned it towards the highway. "It doesn't matter – this'll be all over the internet in 10 minutes. We need to get somewhere where they can't, uh – OK, we can't go to my office. Or my house. And we can't go to your parents because their hotel is a fucking media circus. Uh... let me think."

I turned and looked over my shoulder, to make sure we weren't being followed, and didn't see any cars behind us. The feeling of being pursued, of being quarry, was overwhelming and deeply frightening. All my fight-or-flight instincts had kicked in back at the Renner house – I'd almost screamed when the reporter tried to drag the blanket off me – and my body was shaking now as the adrenaline sang through my veins.

"You have no idea how bad this had gotten," Michael told me once we were on the highway. "You have no idea, Emma. It's crazy – I mean it's literally crazy, people are losing it over this case. Before we do anything we need to arrange security for you."

"I had that guy before," I told him. "The one from Grand Northeastern, and then the one my parents hired. We could call one of them – or both of them, if you think that would be –"

I laughed, too, because I thought he was joking. He didn't sound like he was joking, or look like it, but what he was saying was absurd. 10 security guards? Ex-military? What?

A few seconds later, we pulled over in a deserted rest stop, parked, and turned the engine off. Then he turned to me.
"Emma, I need to say something. And you need to listen. Alright?"
"Um – OK," I replied, frowning because at the time I felt patronized.
"I'm serious," Michael said. "This is serious."
"I know it is," I snapped. "Why do you think I, of all people, wouldn't understand that? You saw what happened on campus, right? Well I was there."

"Yeah, I saw what happened on campus. And what I'm telling you right now is that it's gotten ten times worse since you disappeared. This story is no longer just tabloid fodder, Emma. The fucking New York Times has a permanent presence in River Falls now. The FBI has a huge task force, and a spokesman who gives daily briefings – on this case alone. If the media find you, they're going to tear you apart. It's going to make what happened to your friend look like child's play, OK?"

"I'm not going to the psych ward," I said, leaning back in my seat and rubbing my eyes as what Michael was saying began to sink in. What had happened to Paige was child's play? What?!

"Of course you're not. You have a lawyer – your family actually has a whole team of lawyers, of which I am only one. But you're going to need to sit down with the FBI again, probably many times, and they're going to want answers."

I turned to look out the window at the cars passing on the highway. It was mid-January, the bleakest time of the year, and everything was gray. The FBI were going to want answers, Michael said. But, just like Paige before me, I knew I didn't have any answers for them. None that wouldn't – again, just like Paige – make me look insane. Briefly, a flicker of doubt sprang up in my heart as to whether or not I'd made the right decision coming back.

But it died away again when Michael took his phone out and told me he was going to call my parents. "Let me talk to them first, alright? I need to prepare them for the news, so they don't go telling anyone that you're back before they understand the consequences."

I nodded and pressed my lips together, willing the seconds and minutes to fly by as fast as they could until I could speak to – and see – my family again.

My mum took Michael's call. Just hearing her voice, faint and distorted through the phone, caused an instant lump in my throat. I closed my eyes, attempting to keep the tears from falling, and then put my hands over my face. Michael told her he had good news, and then asked that she get my dad and sister and find somewhere to sit down.

"I want to warn you, Mrs. Willis, that you must – all three of you must – keep this news to yourself for the time being. I don't just mean don't mention it to the reporters, I mean anyone. No phone calls home, no conversations with friends, nothing on the internet."

They agreed quickly and then, after a quick glance at me, Michael told them he was with me at that very moment, that I was in the car beside him. I heard the sound of my
dad crying, and then a shriek from my sister, followed by my mother warning her to keep it down. I've never been so thankful for British emotional reserve as I was at that moment.

When the phone was finally passed to me, I took it with a trembling hand and held it up to my ear. And then I only managed to squeak out a single word before breaking down:

"Mum?"
"Emma! Oh, darling. Oh Emma. Is it really you?"

And then my mum was crying and I heard the phone being passed to someone else, but they were crying too. Finally my sister's voice, choked with emotion, came down the line.

"Emma? Oh my God, Em. Are you OK? Where are you? Are you hurt? Where –"

"I'm fine," I cried, wiping my eyes and taking the tissue Michael offered me. "I'm fine. I'm not hurt. I'm not – nothing bad has happened to me. Please don't worry any more. I _"

"Emma. Tell us where you are."

That was my father speaking, and when Michael heard the question he gently took the phone back from me and told my dad that he was taking me to the lake-house of a family friend, and that my parents and sister were to drive up there only after making sure they weren't being followed.

I spoke to my parents for a few more minutes but there was a sense of urgency, of needing to get somewhere where we could be pretty confident that reporters and police weren't going to pop out of the bushes. My lawyer gave directions to the lake-house and then hung up, and we got back on the road right away.
Just over four hours later, I watched as a silver sedan pulled into the driveway of the lake-house where Michael had taken me, and my mother, father and sister all got out, looking towards the house for some sign of me.

"Don't –"

But it was too late. I was already out the door, running to them, bursting into tears for the hundredth time that day as they threw their arms around me and hugged me so tight I could hardly breathe. We didn't speak right away, even though we tried. The emotion was too high, too strong.

"I'm OK," I blubbed, when my mum stood back to examine me. "I'm OK. I'm not hurt."

"Oh my God," Katie whispered. "Oh my God, Em. You scared the hell out of us, you really did. We were starting to think you were –"

I was pulled into another hug, then, before the word 'dead' could be spoken aloud, and the tears were so copious the collar of my jacket was damp with them.

I want to say we went inside and spent the evening together in front of a roaring fire, happy and safe. I want to say they accepted my insistence that I wasn't ready to talk about what happened – not because it was bad, but because I didn't know how to, just yet. I want to say being with my family again made everything right.

But it didn't. Because before we'd even finished being reunited, a white van came roaring up the road and turned into the driveway of the lake-house, sending a shower of gravel across the ornamental bushes planted on the verge. And before it had even come to a stop, a man was jumping out of the passenger seat. In his left hand was a microphone, and he was followed only seconds later by another man – that one with a camera.

"Inside," my dad said, as my family gathered around me, blocking the men from seeing me. "Right now. Inside!"

"Emma Willis?" One of the men shouted as we began to run to keep ahead of them. "Emma? I'm Rick Jones from the River Falls Vanishing podcast. We were just wondering if you –"

I was ushered into the lake-house and the door slammed behind us. At once, both my father and Michael Rappini were in each other's faces.

"I told you not to tell –" Michael started angrily.
"None of us said a bloody thing!" My dad roared. "You called them! You got us out here so they could ambush –"

"No," I broke in. "No, dad. Michael didn't call anyone."

"Maybe they followed us?" Katie said, putting her arms around me and giving me another hug. "Maybe they – maybe they had one of those tracking things on the car?"

But it didn't matter how they'd found us, because they had.

"We should leave," my mum said. "Come on, let's leave before more of them –"

"No," Michael Rappini shook his head. "No, it's too late. It's a single road up here for the thirty miles – there'll be a pack of them headed here already. If we leave, this is going to turn into come kind of OJ Simpson style –"

And at that exact moment, we all suddenly heard the sound of a helicopter hovering overhead. I turned to my parents, afraid, and although they tried to reassure me I could see in their eyes that they were just as worried as I was.

"We're going to have to deal with this," Michael told us. "We're going to – we'll have to make a statement."

"I don't want her on camera!" My mother exclaimed, to agreement from my dad. "We'll give a statement – we're used to it by now. But not Emma. She's not ready, you can see that for yourself. Damnit, we left Jennifer back in River Falls."

"Who's Jennifer?" I asked miserably, as a searchlight – a searchlight! – from the helicopter illuminated the lake to the back of the house.

"Our media liaison," my mother replied. "She's the one who deals with these vultures for us. But Mr. Rappini said not to bring anyone, so –"

Michael didn't let her finish. "I only said that because I thought you understood how important it was not to allow anyone to follow –"

"I told you NO ONE FOLLOWED US!" My dad bellowed, and I caught my sister's eye, then, and saw that she understood as well as I did that things were well and truly beginning to fall apart.

As if the reporters and the helicopter weren't enough, the sound of a police siren approaching soon made itself apparent. When he heard it my dad began to march back to the door, seemingly intent on greeting the police officers, and my mum and sister and lawyer had to physically hold him back.

"No, Mr. Willis. Sir, no, please – it's a good thing the police are here, they can help control –"

"Like hell it is!" My dad yelled. "We've been dealing with that pack of incompetents for weeks now, Mr. Rappini. They aren't here to help. No, they're here to harass my daughter, to try to get her to confess to something she had nothing to do with! This is private property, we can ask them to leave."

"No, sir. We can't do that."

"You bloody well can and you bloody well –"

"STOP!" Katie suddenly yelled. "Just stop! All of you! Listen. Emma's in a bad way. I'm going to take her – Mr. Rappini, is there a room where I can be alone with my sister? – I'm just going to take her away from this for a moment, if nobody minds."

I let Katie lead me away when Michael told her where the first floor bedroom was,
and noticed that my knees felt funny as we walked down the hallway. My whole body felt funny, actually. Tingly, weak, numb. I stumbled slightly as we walked into the bedroom and Katie wrapped her arm around my waist.

"It's OK, Em," she whispered, kissing my cheek. "It's OK. I'm sorry that it went like that, just now. Everyone is so worked up. Mum and dad are basically insane now, the media is insane, everything is insane."

I started to cry again, then. So did Katie. We wrapped our arms around each other and stood sobbing in the dark bedroom for 5 minutes.

"I'm so happy to see you," my sister told me when she could talk again without breaking down. "I'm so – Emma, I'm so relieved, I –" she wiped her eyes, "I thought you were fucking dead. We all did."

Hot, terrible guilt seized my heart at seeing my sister like that. It was my fault she'd suffered. All my fault. And all of it for a phone! A phone that now lay decaying and forgotten in the middle of some 9th century forest. A phone I'd almost destroyed my family over.

"I'm sorry," I choked out, sinking to my knees. "I'm so sorry, Katie. I'm so sorry.

"It still feels like I might be dreaming," she said kneeling down beside me. "I'm still scared I'm going to wake up in the hotel room in River Falls and realize it was all a dream, and that you're still missing. I've dreamt about you almost every night – about this moment, about seeing you again. You're real this time, right? This is real?"

I nodded, still too overcome with emotions – guilt, yes, but joy, too – to say anything coherent. All it seemed I was capable of doing was apologizing over and over and over. Eventually Katie stood up, sniffling, and helped me to my feet.

"I don't want to go back out there," I told her. "Just – not yet, OK? I can't face it."

"Let the lawyer take care of the reporters. You don't owe them anything," my sister replied, sitting down on the edge of the bed and pulling me down beside her. "They've been hounding us ever since we got here – since before we got here, actually. Someone from the Daily Sun showed up at the house on the day it was announced that you were missing. You wouldn't believe some of the crap they've pulled – one of the US evening shows offered me a quarter of a million dollars to give them an exclusive interview."

I pulled away, shocked. "Really? I asked. "A quarter of a million dollars? But that's so – that's so much! What did they think you were going to tell them?"

Katie looked away when I asked her that, and gave me a dismissive little shrug instead of an answer. My interest was immediately piqued, and not in a good way.

"What is it?" I questioned her again. "Why do you have that look on your face?"

"Because I'm just so happy you're back, Em. And I'm scared for you to find out any of the awful things people were saying after you went missing. I don't think it's a good idea to talk about those things, not now. Maybe in a few days when –"

"Katie!" I stopped her, morbidly curious now. "What is it? What could anyone have possibly said about a missing person? I'm not traumatized or anything if that's what you think. I'm actually fine. So just tell me."

Katie hung her head briefly before looking up at me, her eyes ringed with dark circles and her nose and cheeks red from crying. "They thought you did it," she said quietly, so
quietly that I had to lean in to hear.

"They thought I did what?"

"They thought you killed your friend – Paige Renner. And that you, uh, that you –" she broke off, crying again.

"They thought I killed Paige," I repeated, aware that the police had, at one point at least, had a few suspicions about my involvement in Paige's disappearance. "OK. I mean, the FBI talked to me about it, but I just thought it was because I was her friend and they really didn't have any clues about what happened. So – what? It got out that the police had suspicions?"

Katie was nodding. "Yeah. And then it got out that the police thought you killed yourself. Out of guilt. I never believed it, Em. Mum and dad never –"

"Wait," I chuckled, because it was so ridiculous I couldn't do anything else. "The police said I killed myself out of guilt for apparently murdering Paige? The police said that? Since when do the police speculate –"

"Oh they never said anything official," Katie told me. "All they ever said officially was that they had no witnesses and no clues, but they talk to reporters off the record. Things got out, the way they always do. I'm not sure you understand what a big story this is – the news back home is interviewing psychological experts and police psychologists about this almost every night – and that's in the UK! I don't even know if it was the River Falls police who talked to the press – everyone's an expert these days."

I lay back on the bed, which felt as soft and bouncy as a cloud after weeks of furs on hard wood. "So what you're telling me," I said to my sister, "is that the whole world thinks I did something terrible to Paige Renner? And her baby? And her dad, too, I suppose?"

Katie lay down next to me. "That's not even the half of it, Em. Nobody knew what to think. The police were as baffled as anyone. I mean –"

"What?" I asked when she hesitated, assuming it was more bad news about the monster people suspected I was.

"Well, uh – where did you go?"

I should have been expecting that. And I was – just maybe not so soon, before I'd had time to figure out a story. I closed my eyes and let out a long, slow sigh.

"You know what, Katie?" I asked. "I literally don't even know where to start with that question. I don't."

She turned her head and looked at me, confused. "Well you said you weren't traumatized, right? You said you were fine. So whoever it was that, uh, that took you, they –"

"Nobody took me. Not at first, anyway."

"Nobody took you? Em if nobody took you then... why didn't you contact us? Why didn't you let us know you were –"

"I couldn't."

On one level I was aware that I was digging myself into a hole, answering Katie's simple questions. On another, the memory of what had happened to Paige when she faked amnesia was still fresh in my mind. No one was going to fall for that again – and I
wasn't going to a psych ward.
"You – couldn't? What do you – Em, I don't understand. You've been gone for a month! Are you saying that in all that time –"
"I couldn't," I repeated flatly. "There was no internet, no phone service. There was no way for me –"

Katie sat up and I saw that although she wasn't angry, she was on the verge of it. "Emma I don't even know what you're talking about. What do you mean there was no internet? Do you have any idea what mum and dad have been through since you went missing – or since you left or whatever it was that happened? Where the hell were you?"

It occurred to me at that moment that if anyone on earth was going to believe a story about time traveling and Vikings, it might be my sister. She's always been a little – well, a little woo-woo. A little prone to believing ghost stories, to blurring the lines between the natural and the – apparently – supernatural. I rolled over on my side and looked Katie in the eye.

"Do you still get your tea leaves read?"

"What?" She replied, annoyed because she thought I was changing the subject. "Emma what the hell are you –"

"Just answer me. Do you still get your tea leaves read?"

"Sometimes, yeah. So what? I know you and mum disapprove, I know you think it's silly. Are you sure you've got nothing better to do right now than make fun of me?"

"OK, so you do. And I'm not making fun of you. I'm seriously not – in fact this might be the least likely I have ever been to make fun of you for believing in that stuff. And do you still think you saw a ghost that time in Wales, when we were kids?"

"I did see a ghost."

I smiled at that, at Katie's stubborn insistence, as strong as ever, that she had seen a ghost in our hotel in Wales during one of our summer holidays. And hell, who was I to say that she hadn't seen a ghost? I'd just time-traveled to the 9th century and back – Katie and her ghost had nothing on me.

"OK, you saw a ghost. I believe you."

"No you don't. I know you don't. Why the hell are we talking about this?"

I was still looking my sister straight in the eye. "Because I've seen way more than a ghost, Katie. And I'm trying to figure out if I can risk telling you or not."

Katie sat up straight and looked down at me lying on the bed, her expression skeptical. "What do you mean? You mean where you've been? You mean, uh, that it's something –"

A knock on the door interrupted us and my mother walked in with Michael Rappini. Both of them looked at me.

"What?" I asked, knowing it was pretty unlikely they'd come to tell me that the media and the police had packed up and gone home.

"We're trying to figure out what to do," my mum said. "The police are here, and –"

"You don't have to talk to the police right now," Michael butted in as politely as it's possible to butt in. "They want to talk to you, Emma, but you're not under arrest and they can't force you – not this soon anyway. I would advise setting up a meeting with them
sometime within the next day or two, though – things have already gotten way out of hand with this situation."

"So they're still here? And the media, too?"

Michael and my mum both nodded.

"Well I don't want to talk to anyone," I told them. "Not to the reporters or the police, I mean. I don't want them to see me, I don't want them taking photos. I remember what Paige went through – and what I went through before I left. Can we just stay here?"

My mother and my lawyer exchanged worried glances.

"I know you're probably very tired," my mum said. "So we can stay here for tonight. We'll need to – well, we'll need to make some decisions on how to handle, uh, all of this. But for now, darling, maybe you should just get some rest. We'll think about everything tomorrow, alright?"

No part of me felt ready to deal with what was happening. I wanted to crawl under the plush bed, curl up into a ball with the dust bunnies and stay there forever. Don't get me wrong, I was happy to see my family – mainly because I knew it meant they were no longer worrying about where I was – but it all felt incredibly overwhelming. Even little things – like the electric lights, which seemed to be more dazzlingly bright than I remembered them, or the sound of the helicopter over the lake-house – were contributing to the feeling that I was somehow out of control, caught up in a swollen, flooded river without any means of controlling where it carried me.

Ragnar would know how to handle this.

I almost laughed out loud at the thought of Ragnar charging the reporters, smashing cameras with his axe, lopping off heads willy-nilly. But I didn't laugh, because it wasn't really funny. It was also wrong. Ragnar wasn't stupid, or a savage. He would know what to do, because knowing what to do was what he did, it was what he was good at, and the reason he led a clan before he was even twenty-five.

Not that my confidence in Ragnar mattered. He wasn't there. He was thousands and thousands of miles and centuries away from me, in a place I didn't plan to ever see again. I missed him, there in the bedroom of the posh house owned by my lawyer's friends. I missed Jarl Ragnar, and I felt as lost without him as I had ever felt in my life.

After a shower – a shower I had to run at lukewarm, because the hot water suddenly felt too scaldingly hot for my skin – I emerged smelling so strongly of melon and kiwi body-wash that it made me gag. Katie looked up from her spot on the bed – we'd decided to spend the night together that night, just like we had when we were little girls.

"Are you alright?" She asked, concerned.

I nodded. "I'm fine. That body wash just smells so – ugh, so strong."

Katie gave me a look. "You didn't smell too bad, earlier. Did they have body wash in ghost land, or wherever it is you've been?"

She was keeping her tone light, but I knew my sister was dying of curiosity. As I remembered dying of curiosity myself when Paige Renner told me she had a big secret to
I saw down on the bed and nestled my face into the towel I'd wrapped around my wet hair, so fluffy and soft. Was it the right thing to do to tell Katie about where I'd been? I didn't know. I couldn't know. Surely there were people in the world who wouldn't react with disbelief? Some people believed the Earth was flat. Others that aliens had built the pyramids. My problem was I didn't know any of those people. My sister was the only one with even slightly odd beliefs, and even then I wasn't quite sure how devout she was when it came to having her palms read.

"Why do you look so serious?" She asked a few minutes later, when I still hadn't decided if I was about to make the biggest mistake of my life or not. "You're back now, Em. You've got nothing to be afraid of. There are at least twenty cops outside right now."

"Goodness!" I exclaimed. "Are there?"

Katie grinned. "Yeah. Mostly just wrangling the media, but they're out there. And they declared a no-fly zone over the house, so we don't have to listen to that bloody helicopter all night."

Twenty police officers. A no-fly zone. A media swarm. It was nuts. It was especially nuts to me, because I knew none of these people were ever going to know what had actually happened to Paige Renner, or her son or her father – or me. The only person who could tell them was me, and I had no plans to do that.

My own sister, however...

"So," I started awkwardly, because I wasn't sure of the etiquette involved in discussing time travel. "About the tea leaves –"

"What is with you?!" Katie laughed. "Why do you keep asking me about getting my tea leaves read? If you don't want to talk about what happened, Em, I understand. We don't have to do that right now."

"Actually I want to talk about it," I told her, because I did. Because I was fit to burst with it. Because I missed Ragnar terribly and I wanted someone to understand that, and to listen to my stories about him, to understand who he was. "I just – I don't know if you want to hear it or not. I mean, I don't know if you'll believe it."

Katie narrowed her eyes at me. "You're not joking, are you Em?"

I shook my head. "No. I'm actually not joking.

"I saw granny, too. Granny Fletcher, the night she died. Remember mum and dad were back at home that night, because the doctors said she wouldn't go for a few more days? Well I woke up – I don't know why – and she was there, at the foot of my bed. I wasn't scared. She didn't say anything. She just looked at me, like she was sad at first and then, just before she left, she smiled. I knew what it meant, and the next morning..."
when mum and dad sat us down to tell us the news, I already knew."

"Really?" I asked, feeling a sting in my eyes at the thought of my grandmother. "Why didn't you tell anyone? You were so eager to tell us about that ghost in the hotel and –"

"That's why I didn't tell you," Katie replied softly. "Because I knew you would have made fun of me. Not just you – mum and dad as well."

I looked down at the quilt, momentarily unable to meet my sister's eye for the renewed feeling of guilt.

"I'm sorry," I said a short while later. "And you're right, I probably wouldn't have believed you. I'm sorry for that. I let Paige Renner down in the same way – by not believing her when she told me something... unbelievable."

My sister shrugged. "It's OK, Em. It was a few years ago now, I'm not holding a grudge or anything. I just – I know there are things I can't talk about with certain people. Things that don't make sense."

"You're more right about that than you know," I told her. "Where I've been for the past month doesn't make any sense. None at all. And it happened to Paige before it happened to me. I didn't believe her when she told me. I guess it's poetic justice that I'm in her shoes now, about to tell someone something totally bonkers and afraid you're just going to think I've gone crazy."

My heart started to pound when I realized the moment was almost upon me. I made Katie promise she wouldn't tell anyone what I was going to tell her, regardless of whether or not she believed it. And then I looked her in the eye and told her I'd spent the past few weeks in the 9th century.

"You – what?" She asked immediately, assuming – as I had with Paige – that she just hadn't heard me correctly.

"The 9th century," I repeated. "That's where Paige Renner is now, and she's not coming back. I decided I had to, so you and mum and dad wouldn't spend the –" I stopped talking when I noticed that Katie looked angry and asked her what was wrong.

"Fuck off, Emma."

That's all she said. She just told me to fuck off and rolled over on the bed so her back was to me. I guess I couldn't say I was too surprised.

"I'm not lying," I told her. "I promise you I'm not –"

"What the fuck, Emma!" She shouted, rolling over to face me again and sitting up. "Do you think this is funny? You've been gone for A MONTH! Mum and dad are – I wasn't kidding when I said this whole thing has made them crazy. It has. And me too! Only I haven't been able to show it, because I've been too busy being strong for them. And now you come back and tell me you were time-traveling? Don't even say anything else. OK? Just don't."

I lay back and said nothing for a few minutes. It was good that Katie was angry at me – anything was better than that look I knew I'd given Paige, the one that said I was going to listen, but I no longer thought she was sane.

"What do you think happened?" I asked a short time later. "There were no clues, right? Even the police didn't have anything? Not even an idea? There was no signs of –"

"The police thought you murdered Paige Renner and killed yourself," Katie replied
"Yeah but I obviously didn't, did I? And I bet they didn't have any evidence of any of that, did they? They didn't, because there isn't any – because none of that happened. I spent most of the past month with Paige – and her baby, and her dad and her new husband. She was the one who showed me how to get there – to the past. She's been going there since –"

"SHUT UP!" Katie yelled. "Shut up, Emma! Just – this is so stupid! I don't want to hear –"

But I'd started explaining. And I was damn well going to finish. "I met someone there," I continued, ignoring her huffing and puffing. "His name is Ragnar. He says he loves me – and I think he does. I left him there, because I didn't want you and mum and dad to spend the rest of your lives worrying about me. I didn't want –" I stopped to compose myself and continued in a wobbly voice – "I didn't want you to have to go to sleep every night imagining that I'd been hurt or killed or that I was suffering somewhere in some psychopath's basement. And now I'm never going to see him again and – and –"

I broke down again, burying my face in my hands and sobbing for the Viking Jarl who I knew was back in the Kingdom of the East Angles at that very moment, wondering where I was, wondering why I'd left him just as our two souls seemed to have begun twining themselves together into one.

My sister was looking at me the way you would look at your cat if it suddenly started reciting poetry – like she saw how upset I was, and how I seemed to believe what I was saying at the same time as she knew it wasn't believable. Not as far as she knew, anyway.

"I got a crazy idea that you might be the one to tell," I continued when I saw that she was still too baffled to speak. "Katie and her ghosts and her tea leaves and her palm readers – you always seemed to be a little more open-minded about things like – well, like this. I thought if anyone's going to believe me, Katie will."

"So is this what you're going to tell the police?" She asked finally, after a few minutes of uncharacteristic silence.

"No," I shook my head. "Of course it isn't. They put Paige Renner in the madhouse for saying she forgot what happened – not even for telling the truth! What do you think they'll do with me if I start talking about time-travel and Viking jarls?"

"Viking whats?"

"Jarls. It just means leader. Their leaders are called jarls. And forget the police, what will mum and dad say? They'll think I've been brainwashed or lost my mind or something. You know they will."

Katie nodded. "Yeah. They will. I mean – Em, I kind of do. Like, half of me is pretty sure there's a hidden camera in the room right now, OK? You – you time-traveled? That's where you've been? The ninth century? You know that sounds totally bonkers, right?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I do know. I literally do. Paige told me about it months ago, before she went back. And I didn't believe her. She didn't seem nuts, either, but I definitely didn't even consider believing her. Until she took me back there and –"

"Well can you take me back there?"
I looked up at my sister to check for a smile but there wasn't one. "What – like right now?" I asked, incredulous about how risky that was until I remembered that to Katie it wasn't real so of course there was no risk involved.

She nodded. "Yeah, right now. Not to stay, but just to show me it's real?"

I laughed in spite of myself. "I can't just go there anytime I want. I mean, not just from anywhere. I have to be –" I stopped before I revealed the location of the tree. Katie would never do anything to hurt me, but there was no reason to think she wouldn't tell anyone what I was saying, especially if she decided I was nuts and she needed to let my parents know.

"You have to be what?" She asked, speaking more quickly now, quizzing me.

"Where." I replied. "Not what – where. And I'm not going to tell you where, especially if you keep talking to me in that snippy tone, like I've got to prove this to you. Believe me or don't, Katie, it happened. It actually happened."

"Hey," she said gently, reaching out and patting my arm. "Em, it's OK. I'm not trying to be snippy, I'm just – well, I don't know what to think, to be perfectly honest. It's late. What I think we should do is try to get some sleep and talk about this – all of it – in the morning. You need to rest."

She was right, I did need to rest. I was actually very tired, but the adrenaline that came with revealing such a risky secret to another person was keeping me awake.

I nodded. "Yeah, OK. You don't, uh, Katie – you're not saying you believe me, I get it. But you're not saying you definitely don't believe me either, right?"

"No," she replied, "I'm not saying I definitely don't believe you. But I'm also not –" "OK," I stopped her, before she could say anything else. "That's fine, that's good – that's all I needed to hear."
EMMA

There was no time for my sister and I to talk in the morning. My parents and my lawyer called us downstairs for coffee pretty early, and then my mum wouldn't let me out of her sight, constantly hugging me and kissing my cheeks.

"Why is the –" I started, noticing that the curtains were pulled across the floor-to-ceiling windows that faced the lake.

"The media are out there on boats," Michael Rappini replied, understanding what I was asking about before I could actually do so. "You can't stay here, Emma. The local police are overwhelmed, all their officers are out here dealing with this and the road outside is blocked with media vans, the locals are getting upset. It's just going to get worse if you stay."

"Well where should I go?" I asked. "I can't go back to my flat at –"

"Oh you definitely can't go back there," he agreed, glancing at my parents as a cue.

"We thought you might come back to Norwich with us," my dad said gently. "Not for good, we understand you probably want to finish your degree at Grand Northeastern, but just for a few months until this dies down a little. You'll obviously have to talk to the police before –"

"I don't want to talk to the police," I said before he could finish, which triggered an exchange of concerned glances.

My mum took me by the shoulders and looked me in the eye. She looked worried and that made me feel bad, but I knew she was a lot less worried than she had been before I came back. "Emma," she said, "we know you've probably been through a lot. We're not pressuring you to talk about it just yet, there's going to be time for you to go at your own pace. But you do need to speak to the police –"

"Why?" I asked, turning to Michael. "Am I under arrest? I'm not, am I? So why do I have to talk to them? I don't want to. I just want to get the hell out of here. Take me home, take me wherever, but get me away from all those people outside."

Michael looked at my mother and raised his eyebrows and I saw that they'd already discussed how to deal with me in the best way possible.

"Em," she said, stroking my hair. "You don't have to tell us anything right now but you do – darling, you do need to talk to the police before we leave. Your friend is still missing, and even if you have no idea what happened to her I think you can understand why it
looks to the police like you might have some information on –"

"It will also help with the media," Michael added. "If they find out you're leaving without talking to law enforcement it's just going to throw fuel on some of the crazier theories out there. Sitting down with the police – and I'll be there with you when you do – will give the impression that you're doing everything you can to help find Paige Renner. And that will go a long way to helping shape the narrative of –"

"Shape the narrative?" I asked, smiling at the odd, PR-ish language being used. "You mean shape the narrative as in make it seem less like I'm the one who killed her? I didn't, you know. I didn't kill Paige Renner. She's not even dead! She's fine! She –" I stopped myself short, then, as eyebrows shot up.

"You," my dad started, "Emma – you know where Paige Renner –"

"No!" I wailed, wishing I was alone so I could kick myself for blabbering so carelessly. "I mean – no. No, I do not know where Paige Renner is. I only know she's – actually I don't even know that, either. Please. I'm just tired. Can we get back to talking about that other thing? About going back home?"

It was Michael Rappini's turn. He gave me a small, concerned smile and patted the back of my hand. "I can see you're upset, Emma, and that's fine. Everyone here understands that. But it's important you tell us – even just one of us, if that would make you feel more comfortable – if you have any information about Paige Renner. You're going to need to sit down with the FBI again, and if I go in there without all the information, I won't be able to do my job properly. I won't be able –"

I was about to lose it. The reunion with my family – the simple relief of seeing their simple relief – was turning out to be a lot more fraught and complicated than I had hoped it would be. Yes, they knew I was safe and that was still the most important thing. But it didn't look like I was going to be able to fly back to the UK and spend the next few weeks ensconced in the safe warmth of the family home, unperturbed by reporters or police or crazies. Not without talking to a whole bunch of people I really didn't want to talk to, anyway. I rubbed the bridge of my nose and listened to the sound of my heart beating in my chest, as fast and nervous as a hunted deer.

"Alright," Katie suddenly spoke up from where she'd been hanging back at the periphery, observing. "Let's – uh, let's leave this for later. I think Emma needs to sleep for a little longer – don't you Em? Come with me, I'll take you back to bed and we can deal with this a little –"

"I'm sorry," my dad said, and when I looked up I could see that he really was sorry, and that he wasn't enjoying this any more than I was. "I'm sorry Emma, but we don't have a lot of time. More and more people keep arriving, and the police have asked us to leave. If we don't leave soon, I get the feeling they're going to stop asking and start ordering and I just don't want to put anyone – especially you – through that right now."

Katie wrapped a protective arm around my shoulder and I could have wept for gratitude. "OK," she addressed the people in the room. "She understands. But we need a few minutes, a half hour or an hour maybe, alright? If you can get things organized to leave, that's fine. If she needs to talk to the police tell them we can talk about that. But right now, Emma needs to be safe."
"Right," my mother agreed. "Michael, can you tell the man from the FBI that we need to make sure Emma to be safe and comfortable before we even begin to talk about –"

"Mrs. Willis," Michael responded. "It's not a good idea to leave here without –"

"Mr. Rappini!" My father snapped and my sister, before I could hear anything more, ushered me out of the kitchen and back to the bedroom as the bickering voices of my parents and my lawyer faded out of earshot.

"This is so messed up," I whispered when she'd shut the door behind us. "Oh my God, Katie, this is such a mess. I shouldn't have come back. I should have – I don't know, sent a message or written a letter or something to let you know I was OK, but I shouldn't have some back. I don't think I can deal with –"

"You can send letters from the past?" Katie asked suddenly, which made me chuckle in spite of the shit-storm swirling around us. She was always doing that – asking tangentially related questions in the middle of conversations about other things.

I slumped down on the bed. "No. Well – yeah, no. But I could have left a letter by the, uh – in the woods by the – never mind. I could have done it, maybe."

"Why don't you just tell the police you don't remember?" She prompted and I gave her a look.

"Because you saw what happened to Paige – and you heard what the lawyer said – it'll just be pouring fuel onto a fire. And what will mum and dad think? That something so awful happened to me that I blocked it out? Besides, I basically just admitted I know where Paige is, in front of them."

"You can just say you were confused," my sister told me. "It's only a day since you came back, they'll buy that."

"So – what?" I asked, as we sat there postponing the inevitable, which was leaving the lake-house and going somewhere – anywhere – else in the full glare of the media and police presence outside. "Do you believe me now?"

Katie laughed a little. "Christ, Emma. You do know how you would have reacted if it was me telling you a story about time-traveling and Viking boyfriends, don't you? You wouldn't even have taken it seriously, you wouldn't have told me to get help – you'd just have told mum and dad and then the three of you would have commenced taking the piss out of me for it for the next, I don't know, four decades?"

She wasn't wrong. "Yeah," I replied, because there was no point in denying it. "You're right. I've acted like an asshole to you over that stuff, Katie – the ghost, the tea-leaves. I still don't even know if I believe in ghosts or tea leaf reading, if you care, but I can tell you with certainty that I no longer think my own beliefs are the final word on – well, on anything."

My sister fished a sweater out of one of her bags and tossed it to me. "Here," she said. "Put this on, it's cold out there. And I don't know if I believe you, Em. You don't seem crazy to me – you just seem like Emma. And I have to admit that none of the other theories really make any more sense. I know you. I know you'd be acting differently if you didn't think you knew your best friend was OK. I know you'd want to talk to the police, to help them find her. And I also know that soppy look you get when you talk about some boy you fancy. That's how you looked when you talked about Rans – Ram –"
"Ragnar."
"Yeah, Ragnar. What an odd name. But yeah, you had that look when you talked about him. You've got it again, now."

I looked away, embarrassed. Even though we were both grown women in our twenties, my older sister was still more than capable of making me feel like a bashful little kid.

Just over an hour later, we left. All of us – me, my parents, Katie and Michael Rappini. Newly hired security guards surrounded me and hustled me to a waiting car with blacked-out windows, which I thought to myself would have been pretty cool if the situation wasn't so serious and scary.

Not that having their view of me blocked stopped the ravenous reporters from swarming like angry wasps – or from photographing my family and Michael. They shouted questions at all of us, some of them so offensive they took my breath away.

"Did your daughter kill Paige Renner?! Sir! Ma'am! Mr. Willis! Did Emma murder Paige Renner?"

"Emma! Were you having a sexual relationship with Paige? Were you two sleeping together?"

"Why won't you talk to the police, Emma? Why won't you answer our questions? What are you hiding? Do you have something to hide, Emma? Do you know how it looks to refuse to talk to the police? Emma! Emma! Emma!"

I hunched down in the back seat of the car, Katie on one side of me and my mum on the other – my dad and Michael Rappini were behind us in a second car – and they both put their arms around my shoulders and glared as cameras flashed and equipment bumped against the darkened windows as the press tried to jostle their way into position to keep trying to get a clear photo of me.

A few minutes later, when I felt the car had gotten up speed and there was no more yelling, Katie tapped my back.

"OK," she said. "They're gone. The police didn't let them follow us."

My sister sounded out of breath, like she'd been running – even though she hadn't. And when I looked up I saw that her and my mum both had identical expressions on their faces – wide eyes, open mouths.

"My goodness," my mother whispered, opening her purse and taking out a small container of headache pills, one of which she popped into her mouth. "That was ridiculous. That was –"

"Crazy," Katie finished for her. "That was crazy. They've never been that intense before. You and dad have to hire more security."

The car sped down the road and I watched the tall, slender shadows of the leafless winter birch trees whizzing by outside the window. The further we got from the lakehouse and the media and law-enforcement siege there, the more relaxed I began to feel. Not relaxed, mind you – just more relaxed than a hunted animal. And just when I felt
myself beginning to doze off, a familiar sound filled my ears and jerked me back to a state of hyper-alertness. The helicopter. It was back.

"Fuck!" Katie wailed, peering up and out of the window. The situation was so dire at that point that mum forgot to comment disapprovingly on her swearing. "Mum! Tell the police to call it off – call that lawyer, tell him to –"

"He can't," my mother replied grimly. "He already told us that – the police don't get to tell the media they can't use their helicopters – that's why they had to put a no-fly zone over the lake-house. They can't declare a no-fly zone over the entire state. That's what Mr. Rappini said."

The next few hours were up there with the worst of my life. A hotel had been booked in the largest town within driving distance of River Falls, but my dad called from the car behind us to let us know Michael had just received a call informing him that the media were already massing there, awaiting our arrival. Someone had leaked our booking. Instead of heading for the hotel, then, the cars just drove around, trying to keep ahead of the baying mob that pursued us until we could come up with another plan.

At one point, Katie started crying and something about seeing her cry – especially when it came with the knowledge that I'd come back precisely because I wanted to spare my family any further suffering – made my whole body tight with rage.

"This shouldn't be legal," I said quietly as the car veered down a random exit ramp and my mum, not a woman prone to emotional meltdowns, spoke to my dad and Michael on the phone, desperately trying to figure out what to do before we ran out of gas and ended up on the side of some road, being torn to pieces by vultures with cameras and microphones.

In the end, it was a scene out of a farce that saved me from my pursuers. My mum took off her distinctive bright red jacket and her hat and I put them on, taking care to tuck all my hair beneath the hat. We pulled in at a roadside diner as the helicopters hovered and 'I' – actually my mum in my clothes – got out and ran to the car behind, whilst my sister and I remained in the first car.

And it worked. The choppers all went after the second car as Katie and I sat in the first one, our hearts in our throats, watching, waiting to see if any of them would break off at the last minute and decide to stick with us. None did.

"Good," Michael Rappini said, breathing a sigh of relief down the phone. We'll have someone call your driver within 5 minutes, to tell him where to take you. By the time the press realizes their mistake, they won't be able to find you. I'll see you later today, if this works.

Sure enough, the driver received a call a few minutes later and Katie and I found ourselves, about an hour after that, being driven into an underground parking garage beneath the ridiculously named Sleepyhead Hotel, located somewhere in upstate New York. Our driver then led us down a series of corridors to room 206 and pulled the drapes shut before turning the lights on and telling us to sit tight until my parents and Michael arrived.

We did as we were told.

"Well he seems to know what he's doing," Katie commented after the driver left the
room to stand guard outside the door. "I wonder how much he's costing mum and dad?"

She hadn't meant the comment the way I took it, I knew that. I knew she was just making very awkward conversation in a very awkward situation. But for some reason it just hit me the wrong way and I bowed my head, swallowing against the urge to cry again.

"Oh!" Katie said, horrified. "Oh, Em! I didn't mean it like that! I didn't –"

"I know," I replied. "I know. I just feel so fucking bad right now. Look at all this shit. Look what's happening. This is my fault. I came back to make you all feel better and instead I've just brought this chaos down on your heads!"

"No," Katie shook her head. "No, Em. This isn't your fault. And if you're wondering if it's worth it – to know you're safe? It is. Of course it is."

We fell into a period of silence after that as we both tried, in our own ways, to wrap our heads around everything that had happened over the past day. It didn't feel like a day. It felt like a week, two weeks. And for all the fear and confusion, all the fleeing and hiding – what had been achieved? Nothing. What problems had been solved? None. We were probably going to have to flee again soon, when the media inevitably found me – and it didn't sound like ignoring law enforcement requests for an interview and flying back to the UK to hide out in my parents' attic for the next couple of years was a workable plan.

I was actually relieved when Katie picked up the remote and turned the TV on, imagining we could find some cheesy action movie to lose ourselves in. I didn't recognize what I was even looking at right away. I mean, I did recognize it – a pursuit of some kind, the high camera shot from the helicopter, the car darting down a highway – I just didn't immediately connect it to me. It was Katie who did that, shrieking and covering her mouth in horror.

"Oh no," I whispered, as I realized the pursuit I was watching was live, and that the quarry was my own parents and lawyer. My sister began to weep openly but all I could do was stare at the screen, frozen with horror, as a sedan tried fruitlessly to outrun a helicopter. There were a lot of police cars, too, forming an escort around the lone car.

My sister and I watched, our eyes wide and our hearts beating fast, as the car took an exit off the highway and pulled into a gas station parking lot. Another helicopter buzzed through the shot as a chyrons rotated across the bottom of the screen:

"MISSING STUDENT EMMA WILLIS FOUND"
"EMMA WILLIS SAID TO BE IN GOOD HEALTH"
"EMMA WILLIS IN AN UNDISCLOSED LOCATION"
"EMMA WILLIS REFUSING TO TALK TO FBI"
"EMMA WILLIS A SUSPECT IN PAIGE RENNER'S DISAPPEARANCE?"

Katie moved to turn the TV off but I grabbed her wrist, unable to look away. "Don't."

So we both watched as the helicopter camera zoomed in on the car, on my mum and dad and Michael Rappini as they stepped out, until the shot was so tight I could see the fear on my mother's face and the barely-contained rage on my dad's.

"It – uh – it looks like Emma Willis isn't in this car," the male reporter's confused voice spoke to the announcer in the studio.
"Are you sure, Jim? Is she still inside it?"

They went back and forth like that, speculating on whether or not I was sitting in the sedan or not as I actually sat in a hotel room having the most surreal experience of my life. Within minutes media showed up in their own vans and my sister and I watched as the police frantically tried to keep them back. The officers weren't so much interested in protecting my parents as they were in preventing a riot in a random gas station parking lot.

When my mother broke down and started to cry, her face creasing in full, close-up HD, my stomach turned and I ran into the bathroom to retch fruitlessly into the toilet. When I came back, the TV was off.

"Hey," I said, gagging slightly once more. "Katie, turn that back –"

"No," she said. "We don't need to see this. You don't need to see this. I can't believe this is happening. This is the craziest thing I've ever seen, Em. What are we going to do?"

What were we going to do? More specifically, what was I going to do? I was the reason it was happening. My parents were being chased by helicopters because of me. My sister and mother were crying because of me. Sure, it wasn't my fault in some larger sense, but those were still the facts.

"Give me your phone," I barked at Katie, determined that this circus around my family end at once.

"What? Why? Emma, I don't –"

"Give me your phone."

She gave it to me, then, and I dialed 9-1-1 with one shaky finger.

A female voice picked up a couple of seconds later. "9-1-1, what is the nature of your emergency?"

"This is Emma Willis."

Katie reached over to me and tried to snatch the phone back out of my hand but I ducked away and went to the bathroom, locking the door behind me before she could get it.

"I'm sorry," the 9-1-1 lady said, "can you repeat –"

"This is Emma Willis," I said again. "You know, Emma Willis who just turned up after disappearing? Emma Willis whose parents are on the TV right now? Emma Willis who got kidnapped by aliens? You know, that Emma Willis. And I –"

"Ma'am, I'm going to need you to calm –"

"No!" I shouted. "Listen to me! This is Emma Willis, I am in room 206 at the Sleepyhead Hotel in – actually, I don't know where it is. But I'm here. Tell the police if they want to talk to me I'm here. I'll let them in. I just want this to end. I just –"

"The Sleepyhead Hotel, ma'am? Is that the –"

"JUST TELL THE POLICE I'M HERE AND I'M READY TO TALK!"

I hung up the phone and opened the bathroom door. Katie was on the floor, her knees drawn up to her chin. "Do you think that's a good idea?" She asked. "I mean, without that lawyer here – without any legal representation?"

"I don't care," I sighed. "I didn't kidnap Paige. I didn't kill her. If the police need to hear me say it, if that means we can all go home, then I'll say it. They can film it and
write it down and do whatever they need. And hey – I actually didn't do anything to Paige, so it's not like they've got some smoking gun they can spring on me!
Less than an hour later, the FBI arrived. An older male officer introduced himself as Agent Lapierre. He was full of smiles and reassurances that I was doing the right thing, that it would all be over soon so I could be with my family. He even implied that the police would be willing to help keep the media at bay if I cooperated. When I initially balked at leaving the hotel, knowing that sooner or later my parents would show up, he agreed to let me answer a few questions in the room next to the one I was in, without my sister present.

I didn't feel intimidated like I had when the two agents questioned me at Michael Rappini's office. This time it was just one man, and he had a kind of schlubby, unassuming, middle-aged vibe about him that just put me at ease.

"Do you want something to drink?" He asked when we sat down across from each other at a little table. "I can call and have –"

"No, I'm fine," I told him. "I just want this to be over. I want to go back to England with my family and get away from all this."

"I understand completely," he smiled sympathetically. "It's terrible to see how you and your family have been treated. We'll do our best to keep the media away from you, Emma."

"Thank you." I could feel myself relaxing, and the insane tension of the past 24 hours starting to drain slowly out of me. I believed everything Agent Lapierre was telling me because – well, because he seemed believable, and he was an FBI agent. It was that simple.

"You have to admit it's a crazy story, though, don't you?" He asked. "First Paige Renner goes missing and then her best friend goes missing in exactly the same way a year later – and from roughly the same place! And only one of them returns. It's an interesting situation, Emma."

I didn't even realize, at first, that the questioning had started. I thought the signal would be Agent Lapierre setting up a camera to record it or simply telling me it had begun. He did neither of those things. Instead we just talked, and although he did ask me questions, it felt very much like a normal conversation, his concern for me felt real.

"So let me get this straight, Emma – because I'm not as sharp as I used to be – you're saying Paige Renner is safe?"
I hadn't said that, not exactly. What I'd said is that I wasn't worried about Paige. We were skating towards uncertain territory. The situation was the same as it had been with the other two agents - I didn't want to lie, but I also couldn't tell him the truth.

"I just said I'm not worried about her," I clarified.

Agent Lapierre smiled. "I have a daughter just a little older than you," he told me. "You remind me of her. Young, bright, ambitious."

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking I should have known what he was up to. I shouldn't have let myself be so flattered so easily. You're right, I shouldn't have. But I was vulnerable and scared, sleep-deprived and deeply sad about leaving Ragnar. It's not an excuse, I know that, but Agent Lapierre knew how desperate I was for reassurance, for some way to believe the story had a happy ending – and that he could help make it happen. All I had to do was answer a few more questions. And he kept harping on that point about Paige, about why I'd said I wasn't worried about her.

After a brief digression related to what I was studying at Grand Northeastern – Agent Lapierre's daughter has studied psychology in college – he returned to the matter at hand.

"Please understand," he said, "that I have you here in front of me now – safe and sound. But Paige Renner is still missing, and we still have a lot of people tied up in the search for her. If you have any information on her whereabouts it would be an enormous help to us. It would help get the media off your back, too."

That last sentence was an obvious lie. But the FBI man was so convincing, so seemingly certain of what he was saying.

"I –" I started, sorely tempted to just straight-up tell him I knew Paige was fine because I'd spent Christmas with her. "All I said was that I'm not worried about –"

"Yes," Agent Lapierre said kindly. "But you see how that sounds to me, don't you? You say you're not worried about Paige Renner and so I think to myself hey, this is a smart girl – if she's not worried about her friend, she must have some reason for that. Can you see where I'm coming from here?"

I nodded. "Yeah. It's – uh, it's just that –"

"You don't even have to tell me where she is, if you don't feel ready yet. All you need to tell me is that you know where she is. We can leave the rest of it for another time, no problem."

"Oh. Oh, OK," I stuttered, sensing danger even as I couldn't actually see it in front of me. "Well, like I said – um –"

"Do you know where Paige Renner is?"

"Well I'm not sure I'm comfortable saying –"

"Emma, it's OK. You can tell me. I'm on your side, alright? I want to get to the bottom of this as much as you do. I want you to go home with your family. But before then I need you to –"

"Yes!" I blurted. "Yes, I know where she is – but I – it's not something I can, uh..."

As soon as the words were out of my mouth a pit of dread opened in my gut. I had no legal training, I'd never had to deal with the police before Paige went missing, but somehow I just knew. Maybe it was something subtle in Agent Lapierre's body language,
the brief flicker of his smile transforming into something that was no longer comforting and paternal?

"And how long have you known where Paige is?" He asked calmly.

I looked up at the sound of a commotion outside but the FBI agent waved his hand. "Media. We'll get rid of them. Now, Emma, I don't have much time and you need to get back to your family. Can you tell me if you knew where Paige Renner was before you went missing yourself? Did you know –"

A loud bang came from the hallway outside, but Agent Lapierre was waiting for an answer. "Uh, yeah," I said. "Well, I mean, wait – I'm not sure if –"

The door suddenly burst open. "EMMA! Stop talking! STOP TALKING RIGHT NOW!"

It was Michael Rappini. He was standing there in the doorway, panting, with two police officers behind him. The look on his face scared me – I'd never seen him so nervous.

"Stop talking," he repeated, walking towards me. That's when Agent Lapierre stood up to block his way.

"We've got her," he said. "We've got her, Mr. Rappini. She admitted she knows where Paige Renner is. She admitted she knew where Paige was last month, when she told the FBI in your office that she didn't –"

"Wait!" I shouted. "No! I didn't lie to –"

"You did, young lady," the Agent turned on me, all trace of compassion having gone out of his eyes. "You just told me you knew where Paige was last month, when you told my agents that you –"

My lawyer physically inserted himself between me and Agent Lapierre. "If I could talk to you alone," he addressed the other man. "Sir, please. The entire hotel is surrounded, you know she's not going anywhere. A minute. I just need a minute."

All it took was the FBI agent's slight nod for me to find myself hustled out of the room and back into the first one – where I found Katie hunched miserably on the bed. She looked up when she heard me come in, and I watched as the look of faint hope on her face transformed back into misery when she saw my own expression.

"What is it?" She asked hesitantly. "What did you –"

"I think I just fucked up," I told her, before she could finish. "I don't really understand how, because like I said, I actually didn't have anything to do with Paige's disappearance, and I haven't told anyone I did. But – I don't know, it seems like I fucked up. It seems like I did."

My parents appeared then, escorted into the room by yet another police officer. I stood up, burning with guilt to see both of as disheveled and upset as I had ever seen them.

"I'm sorry," I managed to whisper before my mum put her arms around me and let me blub into her shoulder. It was only when I pulled back that I noticed she had a bandage, marked with a spot of blood in its center, on her left temple.

"What's that?!" Katie asked, seeing it at the same time I did.

"It's nothing," my mother smiled. "I got a little bump on the head from a camera, that's all. We've just come from the emergency room – just a couple of stitches, it doesn't
hurt at all!"

'Nothing.' That's the word she'd used. Nothing. As if it had been a minor accident. She was doing that things mums do, playing it down so as not to upset my sister and I. But I'd seen enough by then to know it had been anything but minor. I could picture the reporters surrounding my innocent parents, and sense how frightened she must have been – and how helpless my dad must have felt when he couldn't protect her.

It occurred to me, seeing my mother's injury and waiting to hear if I was about to be arrested for a crime I hadn't committed – a crime that no one had committed – that I was coming to the end of my very frayed rope. I held my trembling hands up in front of me and knew that I had to get out of there.

"We're staying," my dad said to me, seeing my hands. "Em, we're staying here with you until this is dealt with. We're going to sort everything out and then we're going to go back home together, alright? As a family. I promise you that, darling. We're just so relieved to have you back, to see –"

Michael Rappini chose that moment to walk through the door – and everyone, police included, looked up at him. He looked back at me.

"I've got you a day, Emma. A day. Tomorrow evening you need to be at my office, to speak to the –"

"What do you mean she has a day?!" My father interjected. "A day or what? They're going to arrest her? She hasn't done anything! Why would they –"

Michael held up his hand. When he spoke, his voice was weary. "Mr. Willis, I don't mean to be rude, but I need to speak to your daughter. And we need to leave. The police are going to try to keep the media away from the hotel in River Falls tonight, so we can go back there."

"But –" my mother started, stopping immediately when my dad took in what my lawyer had just said and stood up.

"Right," he said. "You heard the man. Let's get the hell out of here. Come on Em, Katie – let's go."

On the way back to River Falls, Michael explained the temporary deal with the FBI. I'd admitted lying to them, back during the first meeting, when I said I didn't know where Paige was. My lawyer explained that he was sure they didn't have enough to arrest me for anything directly related to Paige's case – because if they did they would have done it already – but that they now, if they wanted, could arrest me for lying to the FBI.

"But I didn't –" I began, already unable to properly recall exactly what I said to Agent Lapierre.

Michael shook his head. "It doesn't matter. That FBI agent said you told him you said you knew where Paige was. His word is enough. Emma – did you say that? Did you tell him –"

"I said I wasn't worried about her! That's all I said!"

"Are you sure? Are you absolutely sure of that?"
I thought back to the conversation. I wasn't sure. I'd lost my patience a little with Agent Lapierre. I hung my head. "No. I – I think I may have said I know where she is just so he would stop asking me about it."

"Right," Michael replied, making sure he'd caught my eye before continuing. "No more talking to the police, Emma. No more talking to literally anyone who isn't me or your immediate family about this, do you understand?"

He was angry, his tone sharp. I wanted to defend myself. "But I just said it because he –"

"It doesn't matter," my lawyer said forcefully. "It doesn't matter why you said, Emma. It matters that you said it. Whatever possessed you to call the police, anyway? How many times have I told you not to –"

"I thought if I talked to them that they could do something about this! That they could make it so we can go back home. I can't stand this! I really can't – none of us can. Look at my mother's face!"

"Emma," my dad said, turning around to face me from the front seat. "What?"

"You need to listen to what the man is saying. I told you we'll sort this out and we will. But we can't do that if you don't listen to advice."

"OK," I whispered, slumping down in my seat and closing my eyes, shutting down. "OK. I won't."

I didn't say another word for the rest of the drive. Even when people asked me direct questions it was as if I were hearing them from a great distance, as if they had nothing to do with me. I was retreating to the only place available to me at the time – my own head. Katie saw it happening and warned the others to just leave me alone for a little while. Thankfully, they listened.

Katie insisted, when I was too tired to do or say much of anything on my own behalf, that she and I have our own room that night. My parents stayed in a room right next to us and Michael went home, promising he would be back again very early the next morning.

My sister started running a bath as soon as we were alone, and then told me to get undressed and get in. She was about to tell me not to be ridiculous, anticipating my protestation at the idea of getting naked in front of her, but I was actually too tired to object. Maybe my brief time with the Vikings had something to do with it, too?

"Are they outside?" I asked, when I'd sunk into the hot water and felt the tide of panic that had been threatening to overwhelm me all day pull back a little. "The police?"

"They're in the parking lot. I think they're in the lobby, too. But they're not right outside the door. We're good."

"I totally fucked up today, didn't I?" I asked. "That guy – that FBI agent – I totally bought it when he told me he was on my side. How dumb can I be? I'm pretty sure they think I killed Paige. And if they don't, they think I know what happened to her. So I don't really know what to tell the police tomorrow. You know I can't tell them the truth. So what am I supposed to say?"

Katie sat down on the toilet seat and propped her chin on her hand. "I – I don’t know,
Em. I don't know.

My big sister didn't know what to do – and she always knew what to do. Katie being at a loss was scarier than being at a loss myself. We both went quiet for a few minutes, still trying to absorb everything that had happened over the last 24 hours.

"Do you know who Monica Lewinsky is?" She asked, apropos of seemingly nothing, a short time later.

The name rang a bell. "Monica who? Ummm. Wait, yeah – isn't she the one who gave the president a blowjob? Why are you asking?"

"Exactly," Katie said, grabbing a bottle of cheap hotel shampoo and getting to work peeling off the label with one of her fingernails.

"Exactly what?" I replied, bemused by the abrupt change of subject, but also grateful for it.

"She's the girl who gave the president a blowjob. That's who she'll always be. Not to herself, or her family, maybe – but to the public. Even when she's 90, that's who she'll be."

"Well that's not depressing at all," I said, frowning. "Wasn't she 18 or something? How is that fair that she'll be –"

"That's what I'm saying!" Katie exclaimed. "It's not fair! It's not fair at all! And the fact that it isn't fair doesn't matter. That's who the media says she is – and so that's who she is."

I sighed heavily, beginning to see where my sister was going. "So you think that's going to be me now? I didn't suck any dick, Katie-kat. Well, unless you count Viking d –"

"Ugh!" She laughed. "I don't want to hear about it, Em! But yeah, you didn't suck any dicks – not any famous ones, anyway, and that's what matters. But they think you killed Paige Renner. 'They' – the media, the public and now you say maybe even the police?"

I nodded sadly. "Yeah, I think so."

"So is this going to be your life now?" Katie asked, and I could see she was on the verge of becoming emotional. "Everyone knows who you are, Emma. Even before you went missing, everyone knew. They know what you look like. A lot of them think they know what you did. Mum and dad think taking you back to the Norwich is going to make everything better but it isn't. We've had reporters from the Daily Sun camped out at the bottom of the driveway ever since you disappeared, you know. Whenever I go to Tesco or the pub or anywhere, people are staring and whispering and wondering if it's me, Emma Willis's sister. There were paparazzi shots of mum and dad on CNN for God's sake!"

Katie was right. I desperately didn't want her to be right, but she was. My reappearance, because it didn't come along with Paige's own reappearance – and because I wasn't going to be able to give anyone the answers they sought to that mystery – wasn't going to solve anything. In fact, it was just going to make it worse – for me, yes, but also for my family.

"Why are you saying this?" I asked, angrily swiping a tear off my cheek and splashing the bathwater onto my face. "Why are you making it all sound so horrible?"

"So you really went back in time, Em?"

Another abrupt subject change. I looked up at my sister with a 'wtf' expression on my
face but she just looked back at me expectantly, waiting for an answer. "Yes!" I replied, exasperated. "Yes, I did."

"And you met someone there? A Viking? Really, Em? You really met a Viking?"

I laughed helplessly, because I knew that a) it sounded ridiculous and b) it was entirely true. "Yes," I said. "Ragnar. I had to sneak out of his camp to leave, too. He chased me. All the time I was with the Vikings – and Paige – I worried about how you and mum and dad were feeling, what you were thinking happened to me. And now I worry about him, about what he's thinking, about how much he's missing me."

Another tear slid down my cheek while my sister studied me.

"You were only gone a month," she said a few seconds later, and not unkindly. "You're not – Em, you're not saying you fell in –"

"I don't know what I'm saying!" I cut in before she could utter the word that I couldn't stand to hear, not then. "I don't – I don't know! It doesn't make sense, OK? I get it. I get that. But it was – Katie, things are different there. It's different with men and women, too. They don't seem to play games like we do. Well he didn't, anyway. And he was the one who said – uh. He said that ..." I trailed off.

"He said he loved you?" Katie offered gently and I nodded, because by then I was too emotional to talk.

"And was it safe there, Em?" She asked after another few minutes of unhappy silence passed. "Were you safe?"

I thought about everything I could tell my sister. About the fight with Baldric on the beach, being taken by Lord Cyneric's men, and then taken by Jarl Ragnar and his men. I thought about the man Ragnar had killed at the estate. It obviously wasn't anything like 'safe' in the past. But then I thought of Ragnar himself. Of his boldness, his strength, and the force of loyal, fit young warriors at his back. Ragnar would give his life to protect me. He hadn't said it, but I knew it. And it wasn't just Ragnar and his men – it was Eirik and his. Who had the power to overcome the Vikings at that time? No one, and I knew that because I knew that the invasion to come was going to be successful, that the forces of the eastern parts of Britain were no match for the men from the North.

"I think I was," I said, eventually. "I think I was safe. I don't think everyone else was, not all of them – but I think I was."

"Because of him?" Katie asked, intuiting the underpinnings of my words.

"Yeah. Because of him. Paige Renner married one of them, too – another Jarl. So she's safe, too. Safer than she would be back here, that's for sure."

"Really?" My sister cocked her head, curious. "You think she's better off there than here?"

I shrugged. "What have we been talking about? You think Paige Renner would be OK if she came back?"

"No," Katie replied. "You're right. She wouldn't be. She obviously wouldn't be."

"So why do you have that strange look on your face? Do you disagree?"

"Nooo..." she replied slowly. "No."

"What, then?"

My sister gazed pointedly down at me. And then she said maybe the last thing I ever
expected her to say:
"If it's true, then – if you went back in time, and Paige Renner is there and she's safe, and you were safe – and you have someone who loves you... " she paused, "then why – Em, why don't you go back?"

My mouth fell open, but no words came out. Katie wasn't joking, I could see that.
"What –" I started, when I could speak again. "Katie, what do you –"
"I don't mean forever," she cut in. "No, not forever. Just for – for a while, maybe."
"Well how long is a while?!" I exclaimed, shocked.

Katie seemed to notice, then, that I hadn't greeted her suggestion with unalloyed enthusiasm. "You don't have to," she said quickly. "I'm even saying you should, Em. Not at all. I just got you back, didn't I? We just got you back. But this is going to be hell, you know. The media, the public – not to mention the police, and who knows what they think they have on you – it's going to be awful. If you went back until all of this died down – and that's going to take way more than a month, believe me – maybe you could come back in some way that no one else would know about? Do you think you could do that? I don't know how it works."

After the initial surprise of my sister's suggestion passed, I started to think about it. To really think about it. Not going back forever, but just for, as she put it – a while. A year, maybe? A year and a half? Long enough for me to be able to sneak back without having to worry about the woods on the Renner property crawling with police and reporters. Long enough for other stories to take hold in the collective mind of the public. It would mean seeing Ragnar again, and my heart seemed to swell in my chest at the thought of that reunion. It would mean seeing Paige again, and her family. It would mean living with the Vikings, learning new ways of living – and being. It would also mean leaving my family a second time. Even thinking of that made me want to ugly-cry in the bath, right there in front of Katie.

"What about mum and dad?" I whispered squeakily.
"We'll tell them," she said. "We'll –"

"No," I replied before she could continue, knowing without doubt that telling my parents about the time-travel would be a huge mistake. "No, Katie. You know that wouldn't –"

"I don't mean about the time traveling!" She smiled. "I just mean – I'll tell them you've gone somewhere. That you're safe. That you needed to get away from everything – from the situation here. None of it will even be a lie! But if they assume you're drinking Mai Tais on the beach in Belize, or South America – no harm done, right?"

"But what about everything else?" I asked, still too afraid to really let myself consider that what Katie was talking about could actually happen. "What about the police?"

"What about them?" She replied. "If you're back in time, they won't be able to find you. And mum and dad won't know where you really are. Only I'll know – and I won't say a thing. They can't do anything to us, it's not like we're suspects."

"And the media? All of those reporters waiting at the bottom of the drive – what about them?"

"Do you think the number of reporters hassling us is going to increase or decrease if
you're there?"

That was a good point. I pinched my nose between my fingers and lay back in the bath, submerging my entire head underwater. And then I stayed there for a few seconds, trying to figure out if Katie and I were insane to be thinking of such a plan, or if it just made sense.

When I popped back up and caught my sister's eye, she must have seen the truth I hadn't yet admitted to myself.

"You want to go." She said simply.

I nodded slowly. "Yeah. I – I think I do."

"Well if that's what you want, you'd better get out of the bath and get dressed right now. Because it's going to have to be –"

"Tonight?" I gasped, knowing she was right but also hoping, somehow, that she wasn't.

"When else?" She asked, tossing me a towel. "You're talking to the police again tomorrow, right? What if they decide to arrest you? What if they decide to follow you everywhere?"

"They're already following me," I noted, knowing there were police officers stationed outside the hotel, and that they weren't just there to keep the press at bay. "In fact how are we even going to get out of here tonight, Katie? I can't just walk out – even if the police did let me go, the media are going to follow us."

"OK," Katie said, leaving me alone in the bathroom to dry off and continuing the conversation from outside the door. "Where are we going, anyway?"

"Paige Renner's house. The property, not the house."

There were a few moments of quiet as my sister thought about how we were going to get past the throngs of people waiting outside. I pulled my clothes on and paused, briefly, when I caught sight of my own face in the mirror. Was I happy? Sad? I couldn't tell. I didn't know.

"OK," my sister said when I emerged from the bathroom. "OK, here's the plan. I'm going to leave. I'll tell mum and dad I need to be alone, that I want to go for a drive alone. I'll walk out the front. You – um, you're going to have to meet me somewhere."

"Where?" I asked, almost certain the plan was already scuppered. How the hell was I going to get out of that hotel with all those people outside, all waiting for a glimpse of me?

Katie strode over to the window and wrenched it open. I joined her in leaning out. Our room was at the back of the hotel, looking out over a grassy, landscaped area and then a small stand of trees a little further back. No one was out there, because so far no one had been able to find out what room we were in, and because there were no doors on that side of the building.

We were on the second floor, and I looked down at the snowy ground, thinking.

"I could make that," I said, about 75% convinced that I could. "That snow looks pretty deep, too – that should help."

"I could meet you over there," Katie said, pointing to a spot at the edge of the trees, beside the road. "Give me twenty minutes after I leave, I'll have to get past everyone.
Actually, ummm... OK, I know. You wait here, by the window. I'll flash the headlights when I'm ready – if the coast is clear. Is that – is that OK?"

Neither of us were convinced it was going to work. But we both recognized that no one else had a better plan on offer. When she started gathering her things I reached out and grabbed Katie's arm.

"Wait! You mean – are you leaving right now?"
She nodded. "Yes. It's kind of now or never, Em."

"But what about mum and dad?" I asked, as my voice rose in pitch again.

"What about them? You can't see them – you know that, right? You can't say goodbye, Emma, because then they'll ask why you're saying it."

"But can't I – can't I just see them?" I whispered, knowing what the response was going to be.

"No. There are cops in the hotel. Plus you're emotional – we both are. Mum and dad will know something is up. We just – Emma, we just need to go, OK? We need to go right now!"

Half an hour later, as I stood trembling at the hotel room window, a car pulled up beside the woods and I watched, half-filled with dread and half with hope, as its headlights blinked at me once, then twice. It was Katie. I stood in the dark for a few moments, listening to the sound of my own breathing, my own hammering heartbeat. And then I pulled the window open again, not quite believing what I was doing, and climbed up so I was crouched on the edge of the frame.

The ground looked further away than it had the first time. Jump. Just go. You have to do it now. Jump, Emma! Jump!

I jumped. And then I landed in the snow, half on my feet, half on my ass. It was dark and quiet, the only light being that from the streetlights lining the road a fair ways away, and the only sound the odd car driving by. I glanced around, terrified that a camera flash was going to go off or someone was going to start screaming my name. But no one did.

When I got to my feet, I started to run. And I kept running, falling a few times in the snow, until I got to the car and opened the passenger side door.

"No!" Katie said. "Get in the back. And stay down."

Of course. I slammed the front door and climbed into the backseat. "OK," I panted, crouching down in one of the foot-wells behind the passenger seat. "OK, Katie."

It didn't take long to get to the spot where I'd parked my own car just over a month ago, intending to go back to the past to get my lost phone and come right back. As we stepped out, after Katie made sure no other cars were coming, I noticed that it simultaneously felt like a very long time ago and also like it could have been yesterday.

"Now what?" She asked. "Is this it? Right here? What do you have to do to –"

"No," I shook my head. "No, it's this way..."

I led us across the Renner's field and into the deserted woods, thankful for the bright moonlight, and we were soon at the tree. Katie noticed I'd stopped.
"Emma," she said, panting with the effort of trudging through the snowy field. "Is this it? Is this the right place to, um – to do it?"

When I started to cry, I almost expected Katie to comfort me, to produce some reassuring words. But she was crying, too. "Stop it," she sniveled, punching me on the shoulder. "It's not forever, Em. It's just for a little while."

"Just make sure you don't change your phone number," I replied, my voice hitching with emotion. "Because I won't know how to – to – I won't know how to contact –"

We fell into a hug and held onto each other tightly, both of our bodies shaking. "I'll leave some money here," she said, wiping her cheeks off. "I'll – yeah, I'll put some cash into a plastic bag and bury it here. I'll put a big rock on top of it, OK? So when you come back, you can get a taxi and some, uh, some –"

"Thank-you, Katie," I said, and by then I was crying so hard I'm not even sure she understood me. "Th–thank-you."

"We're so stupid," she chuckled through her tears. "Look at us! Jesus. So much for stiff upper lips, huh?"

The plan was for me to come home at some point. That was the plan. It wasn't forever. But even as neither of us spoke of them out loud, both of us felt the weight of alternate possibilities hanging over us. I hadn't had time to explain the way the tree worked, not really, but what if I couldn't get back to it in the Viking time? What if the invasion, which I already knew to be successful, went badly just for Jarl Ragnar and his men – and me? What if something happened to Katie, in the future? What if, what if, what if?

"You have to go," she choked out. "Mum and dad will start worrying if I'm gone too long."

"What are you going to tell them?" I asked, stalling. "What are you –"

"I'm going to tell them that you're safe. And that you have been safe all this time. I'll tell them you needed to go away, to let the situation calm down. I'll tell them you're coming back."

"I am coming back!"

"I know, Emma. I know you are. I love you."

Emma and I were close, but we were still English, we still didn't actually say those words to each other. In fact I think that was probably the first time either of us had.

"I know," I cried, burying my face in her shoulder. "Me too, Katie. I love you too."

Before I left, I told her to stand back a little so as not to risk bringing her with me. And when she stepped away I only just managed to let her go. I didn't want to, but I knew I had to.

"OK," I said, so emotional the words were just squeaks now. "OK. I'll see you soon, Katie. Tell mum and dad I love them. Tell them I'm safe."

"I will. I promise. See you soon, Em."

And then I was gone.
She was gone. I'd chased her into the woods, I'd seen her – and then she was gone. Not further into the woods, either. Somewhere else. The place she'd told me about – her home. I refused to believe it at first, and my men and I spent the whole day searching under every fallen tree, every bush, everywhere.

But I knew she was gone, because I felt her absence. It was sudden, too. She didn't fade away like an animal fleeing a huntsman, she was just utterly... gone. There one moment, and then not there the next.

I needed to see Jarl Eirik again. I needed to see Jarl Eirik's wife again – she was from the same land as Emma, was she not? I needed answers.

"Jarl," Arva approached me slowly, not looking me in the eye, when I arrived back in camp long after the sun had set. "Jarl, I –"

"DO YOU KNOW WHERE SHE IS?!" I roared, causing her to flinch away even further.

"No, Jarl," she whispered. "I'm sorry, Jarl."

"Don't speak to me of anything – of anything! – unless it is her," I growled, storming onwards towards my roundhouse. Others who saw me coming leapt aside, having heard my bellowing at Arva and understanding not to get in my way at such a time.

And then, once inside the roundhouse, I realized I did not want to be there, either, and left again. I spent most of the night like that, roaming around the camp as if possessed by bad spirits, my hands clenching and unclenching, as chaotic and out of control as I had ever been.

I spent the night hating her. How dare she leave? How dare she?

"She'll not return," I declared to Fiske when he found me just before dawn, leaning against the gate that kept the pigs in their sty at night. "If she knows what's good for her, she'll not return. I'll kill her myself if she does, Fiske – I swear it. Whipping's too good for a woman who spits in a Jarl's face. I'll open her pretty throat with my dagger!"

"God's allow you the chance," Fiske replied, very softly.

"We must go north again," I told him. "To Jarl Eirik's camp once more. I have – I need to see his – I need to see my old friend once more. There are some matters still to discuss. Important matters. We must go soon – this morning! We must go north when the dawn –"

"The men aren't ready," Fiske said, and I could see he was afraid of my reaction from
the way he shrank away from me after he spoke. "This morning is too soon, Jarl. I beg you give it a day, or two. Perhaps she will return before –"

"Ready a fresh horse then, if my men cannot be roused from their beds! Voss, I'll ride north myself!"

"But Jarl, the marshlands are treacherous between here and Jarl Eirik's –"

"Are you dull?!" I shouted. "Do you not feel the chill in the air, Fiske? The marsh will be frozen solid all the way north."

"But the horse," Fiske continued, trying my patience like he had never tried it before, "on the uneven marshland – even if frozen, the beast is likely to break a leg! And you riding north unaccompanied – who knows what gangs of outlaws and East Angles roam the land? Man to man, my heart rests easy but seven or eight of them? More than that? You're a strong man, Ragnar – the strongest I know – but still a man. We need you, Jarl! The people here, they crossed the sea with you, they put their trust in you. How can you risk –"

Fiske was smart to appeal to my sense of duty. He was right, too. It was a stupid risk to ride north alone, even for a Jarl.

"Ready eight of my men, then," I told him. "Eight of the best – and have the smith sharpen their blades before we go. And eight well-rested horses, as well."

My advisor was hesitating, looking away. It didn't take a wise man to see he did not wish to carry out the tasks I bid him to carry out.

"Please Jarl," he beseeched. "Please think of the people here – the women, the injured and sick. There were no Angles come in the night when you were north with half the warriors, but what if we don't get so lucky this time? What if they find us undefended, our Jarl gone away? You know, Jarl – you do know..." he trailed off and I, having cooled ever so slightly, looked sharply towards him.

"What, Fiske? I do know what? Don't test me this night – of all nights, not tonight. Speak your mind."

"You know that she is not there, Jarl," he said, his voice barely a whisper, his eyes averted. "What do you think you will find in the other camp to get the foreign girl back? How will they –"

"Voss, Fiske!" I barked, lifting my hand as if to strike him and then snatching it back, ashamed. "Voss! Who says I ride north to find the foreigner?! Who speaks lies? I have matters to discuss with Jarl Eirik – matters of importance – of the invasion!"

If my blood hadn't been running so hot I would have seen it on Fiske's face that he knew the truth, that he knew I had no reason to go north except to seek information on Emma's whereabouts. But my blood was running hot, and I was not thinking of anyone except her – and how thoroughly I was going to make her regret her ungratefulness when I got my hands on her again.

When told a second time to ready eight men and eight horses, Fiske no longer attempted to argue.

We rode out before the sun was at its highest point that day, heading north along the coast with the cold wind in our faces and the sound of the gray waves crashing against the shore to our eastern side. I drove my horse hard, and so my warriors drove their
horses hard. Before nightfall, we came to a place where the coastal path led inland around the delta of a river, and there I found that the marshes were not frozen solid. Colder, yes, and thicker than water or muck – but not solid. My warrior Sigurd's horse sank up to its mid-legs with no warning, and it took the effort of all nine of us to pull the animal free. There would be no more progress made that night. Frustrated and snappish, I ordered them back to the beach where we spent a miserable night sleeping exposed to the winds, and awoke at the dawn with our bones aching. The horses suffered too, huddling together where we'd tied them, and already weakening.

As the men hunched against the chill and produced pieces of bread and cheese from their satchels for breakfast, they did not meet my eyes. When one stood, to ready his horse, I told him to wait. I told them all to wait. And then I walked down to water's edge, where the gray sea battered the rocks and the bleakness of the land was matched only by the bleakness in my own heart.

How far were we from Eirik's camp? More than a whole day, I thought. The horses were cold. The land was not as passable as I had imagined, and already my men were tired. How could I ask them to keep going? They knew we were on a fool's errand – and I was the fool. They knew as well as I did of the invasion to come, of the need to keep the fighting men as fit and healthy as possible. They knew I was risking their lives for no greater good except my own.

When I returned I gave them my orders plainly, telling them to turn around at once and head right back to the encampment. When they asked of my plans I told them I would be right behind them, that I needed time alone to think, to accept that Emma was gone. Most of them didn't believe me, but I was their Jarl and they had no choice but to listen – and to do as I said.

I felt better when they were gone south again, reassured as I was then that none of their pointless deaths would be on my head. Besides, I could make quicker progress alone, with only my horse for company and my mind temporarily freed of the worries of command.

At first I stuck to the coast, allowing the horse to pick its careful way through treacherous rocks made slick with seaweed, but I was soon forced back inland by the impassability of the terrain. And there, for a short distance, I found a corner of the marsh that seemed able to take the weight of a Jarl and his mount. Something in me knew I had to keep moving, I had to focus on the next step in getting Emma back – to stop would be to bring it all crashing down around me. That next step was talking to Eirik's wife, who I felt certain would know where my girl had gone to.

Soon, though, the marshland softened again, and I could not go on. I couldn't go on with my horse, anyway. So I dismounted and removed the creature's reins, bidding it luck in finding the encampment again and leaving it behind me to continue alone. Which I managed, for some time. My feet were cold and wet, but I was making progress.

And then came the time I was no longer making progress, and found myself almost thoroughly mired in the marshlands, with nothing but more marshlands around me, stretching out as far as my eyes could see. I stumbled forward onto a small, grassy hillock, a tiny island of semi-solidity, and fell onto my knees, my chest aflame with anger.
It was her fault I was there - without men, without horses, without hope. And even as I knew it to be true, and I knew her to be the wickedest woman who had ever lived, still my arms ached to hold her again, my eyes ached to see the little curl at the corner of her mouth when she wanted to laugh at me but she tried not to, my loins ached to feel her opening herself up underneath me...

"Emma," I whispered into the frozen grass on the hillock, lowering my face so the stiff blades almost touched my lips. "Emma. Emma, Emma."

It didn't even matter why she'd left. What did it matter specifically who or what stole her away when the fact was that someone did, something did - and whoever or whatever it was meant more to her than I.

That was the truth that finally broke me, there in the freezing marsh. That was the truth that had driven me to mistreat my advisors, my warriors - even the horses. Something or someone in the world meant more to Emma than I meant, and she had made her choice. And I, in turn, had made my own people pay for the rage and pain she caused in me with her fickleness and her disloyalty.

"Emma," I spoke again into the grass as the freezing marsh water crept further and further up my legs, soaking my leathers. "Emma! Emma!" My voice became a hoarse cry, my throat raw from the winter wind, and still I got louder and louder, until it seemed even the people in the Northland must hear my misery.

"EMMA!" I howled, clenching my fists until I thought my fingers would snap."EMMA! EMMAAAA!"

Who knows how long I bellowed for her, knowing there was no one but the sky and the cold marsh to hear? I only knew that soon I would be dead and my people, who I had sworn to safeguard and fight for, would be without their Jarl. The water had gone too far - it was almost at my loins now - and I had not the energy to go back.

I tried a few times to move but my limbs grew heavy so I lay my cheek in the ice-frosted grass and imagined who would tell my mother and father I was dead, lost in the marshlands of the Kingdom of the East Angles? Who would tell Eirik and Fiske and Arva? And after I was dead, and a new Jarl chosen, how long would any of them even remember me?

It didn't matter. I settled into the grass as numbness took hold in my hands and feet and began to crawl up my limbs towards my heart. And then I fell into a series of fleeting dreams, mostly just images of people I had known. I saw my cousin Arvik, who died one day when were not yet ten winters old and spending the day digging a cave in the sandbanks near my parent's longhouse. The sand collapsed on top of us and only I made it out. It was no matter now, for my time had come and soon I would see Arvik again. I saw battles, too – recollections of danger – the sound of a sword slicing through the air, the feeling of a dying man's breath on my neck.

Now I was the dying man.

And yes, she was there too. My Emma, my girl. She came to me in those death-dreams, as warm and bright and full of life as ever, her arms reaching for my neck, her body lifting itself up to mine. I jerked awake at one moment, when she seemed to speak my name aloud into my ear in waking life – but she was not there and I tumbled back
into the darkness where, now, she slipped away from me and I had only time to catch glimpses of her tunic or a lock of her hair as she flitted around a roundhouse or a tree, or sank beneath the waves of some unknown ocean.

Soon even the dreams slowed, and I was left with nothing but whispers and images seen as if through water. Her sighs echoed in my mind and I was sleepily glad of it, that she would be the one singing me to the next world...
I opened my eyes and blinked. Did I open my eyes and blink? Does a dead man do such things? But yes, I seemed to be awake, although I did not know why, and even as I felt it a final cruelty from the gods to let me linger so long.

A sound. Was it the wind? I tried to turn my head to look but to do so seemed to take more strength than I could find within my frozen body.

Again, the sound. A voice? It couldn't be. Men hear things when they are not long for the world, or so say the gothis. Voices of the warriors and family members who have gone before them. Was it that I heard? Again I tried to move, and again my body did not respond.

Soon. It will be over soon.

But there it was once more and louder this time. I struggled harder to lift my head and saw – something. A dark shape, slowly getting larger as it – was it heading towards me? Across the swamp?

"Jarl! Ragnar!"

One of my men had come back for me. He was making his way across the marsh. I had to warn him. I tried to lift my arm to signal him to stay back, but the limb was useless. I tried to shout at him to stay away but nothing more than a hoarse whisper came from my lips.

"No," I rasped, almost too quiet to heat the word with my own ears. "No! Stay back!"

And then I closed my eyes and opened them again, confused, as the dark shape became three dark shapes and their outlines began to stand out against the gray sky. Three men were coming for me.

"Jarl!" One shouted as they approached, and then spoke to his companions. "Take his arms! Here, give me the fur, it weighs him down. Now – pull!"

I did not feel myself lifted up, as all feeling had gone. But I saw the marsh slip out of view until I took only sky in through my eyes – and then the figures of my men, one on either side and one at the front, their furs flapping in the wind. They spoke, their voices loud and urgent, but I did not understand all that they said. I did not even understand if they spoke to me or each other.

And some time later, it could have been a moment or a lifetime, I was still again, having been laid on the first patch of solid ground my warriors could find. Still they
shouted to one another, and beat their hands against me to try to make the blood flow
again. It seemed to work, as a sensation like waking up came over me and my eyes and
ears began to function once more.

"Jarl!" A voice cried. "Look – his eyes! Jarl Ragnar – do you hear us?"

But my lips were still too frozen to form words. All that came out was a grunt.

"Don't stop rubbing his limbs," another voice came now. "His leathers are soaked from
the marsh, the danger is not passed."

"When will she arrive?"

"Who's to say? How long can Brynjulf's horse travel with two riders? She arrives when
she arrives, maybe some time from now."

The word hung in my mind, apart from all the other words I was taking in. 'She.' At
first it just floated there, like a ship on calm seas, not moving. But then it began to sink
in, it began to wake me. She. She.

A woman? What woman? What woman would be coming to me now, as I lay frozen on
the beach with my men tending me?

I tried to lift my head, to speak, to ask what woman – which woman? – who? "Wh–" I
said, because my lips still would not form around the rest of the word. "Wh–, whhh–"

One of them men discerned what I tried to say. "The woman," he told me, as his
hands squeezed and pummeled my right arm, drawing the blood back into it. "The foreign
woman – Fiske and the men found her outside camp – we met a scout on our way back,
telling us Brynjulf rides north with this woman, to bring her to you."

I collapsed back against the earth, thinking it the cruelest trick of all – if I still lay
dying alone in the marshlands – to make everything seem so real. Because it did seem so
real.

Was it true? Was she found? Was she coming back to me? I tried to sit up again, but it
was still no use. My men continued to work on me, lifting my limbs now, shaking them,
and then putting them back down. No more mention was made of her – of Emma – and I
was too numb and too afraid of hearing the answer to ask again.

And then, in the distance – hooves. My men heard it, too, because they looked up.
They kept looking, as I lay almost helpless on the ground and my poor, tired heart began
to beat itself awake again.

"Is it –?" I asked, my words slurring into each other like a man who has taken too
too much sweet mead. "Is – is it –?"

"Aye, Jarl," someone spoke. "It's Brynjulf, and he has the woman with him."

A jolt ran through my body and I managed to sit up, staring blindly into the distance
because my eyes were still blurry. But yes, there was someone on a horse – I could see
enough to see that. And as it got closer I saw something else – another person, held in
front of the rider, smaller than him. Something flew out in the wind, and my heart almost
leapt out of my chest – it was hair. Her dark hair, that she had laid across my chest as
she slept, and that I had gently run my fingers through, marveling at its softness.

"They found her!" A triumphant voice came from the man working on my lower legs.
"Here she is, Jarl! They got her!"

I managed to pull myself to my feet as Brynjulf approached, but it was difficult to
and two of my warriors had to hold me. When the horse came close enough I saw, finally, that it was her and a great surge of emotion barreled through me. I moved to go towards them but stumbled and fell to one knee before forcing myself up again.


"Bring her here!" Someone instructed Brynjulf. "Bring her to the Jarl!"

And so she was lifted off the horse and I saw that her hands were bound in front of her and her cheeks burned bright pink from the cold.

When she was set on the sand in front of me our eyes met and I saw that she was afraid. She should have been afraid. A war raged in my heart, making it difficult to breath, between the half of me that wanted to pull her into my arms and never let go, and the half that wanted her to feel what she'd done. I reached out with one hand, the strength returning to me just slightly, and she flinched away, seeing the way I bared my teeth. Brynjulf pushed her forward again and she managed to utter a single word before my hand closed around her throat:

"No!"

I tightened my grip on her slender neck but I was not strong enough yet to cause any real discomfort. Even bound by the wrists, helpless and cold, she managed to mock me.

"Shall I do it?" Brynjulf asked, gripping the hilt of his sword as he saw the fire in my eyes.

I shook my head quickly, not looking away from Emma even as her eyes went dark with fear and welled with tears that froze on her cheeks.

Gods but she was beautiful. I tried again to tighten my hand and then, when she felt the strength of my grip, her eyes widened in shock, as if she couldn't believe I was doing it.

"Voss!" I snarled. "Vuh, vuh –" I paused and breathed deeply, no longer able to tell how much of my shaking was rage and how much cold. "Voss! What have you done, girl! What have you –"

Emma tried to speak but my hand was too tight on her throat so I let go and curled it into her hair, jerking her head back roughly until she cried with fear. I wanted that. I wanted her fear. And still it wasn't enough, it didn't make up for what she had done.

"Ragnar!" She gasped, as more tears leaked from her eyes. "Ragnar –"

"What is it? I shouted, although my voice still croaked with chill. "You speak to me even now, do you? You speak to me as if you – as if – as if you had any right to do such a thing! What kind of evil lurks in your breast, girl, to dare to do such a thing?!"

But she spoke again, as if she longed for death. And when I heard what she said, she confirmed it.

"Is this your love, Jarl?" Her hands struggled and worked against the ropes that bound them and still she did not look away. "Ragnar? Is it? Go on and kill me, then. But when I'm dead, don't tell yourself it was love!"

Brynjulf and my men stood ready to move, watching intently, waiting for me to give them the order to cut her throat. But she couldn't die yet, because she didn't understand. She still didn't understand.

I managed to lift myself to my feet and lean back, roaring incoherently at the sky
before turning right back to her.

"You do not speak of love to me, girl! It's not me who left in the night, is it? It's not me who took another's heart and cast it away like so many dry crusts after a feast! It's not me who –"

"But it's you has your hand around my throat, isn't it?" She squeaked, as Brynjulf jerked her back again. "It's you who intends to kill the one you love, isn't it? Right here on the beach, as your men watch? I came back to you, Ragnar. Look at me here, now, in front of you – I CAME BACK! And now you rage at me as you hold your fucking hand around my throat?! Fuck you, Ragnar! Fuck you! Kill me, then! See if that fills your heart with the things I filled it with!"

I didn't even have my hand around her neck anymore and still she choked on her words, her eyes flashing and a small vein standing out on her forehead. She was angry. As angry as I was, if that was even possible.

"Leave us," I growled at my men. "LEAVE US! NOW! GO!"

Brynjulf tossed his dagger onto the ground in front of Emma, eying me pointedly as he did so, and then they left, heading further up the beach and into the trees.

I leaned in close, breathing in Emma's scent, almost breaking. "Why have you done this?" I whispered. "Why, Emma?"

"I didn't leave," she replied, panting with emotion. "I did – but then I came back to you. Here I am. I came back for you, Ragnar! Do you think I would be back here in this place if it wasn't for you? And now I see you eying that knife on the ground like you can't wait to drive it into me."

As my limbs warmed and began to work again, it seemed my thoughts followed. Emma cowered on her knees in front of me, her eyes speaking of betrayal just as my own heart did. I looked at Brynjulf's dagger for a second and then picked it up to toss it out of reach. And then I bowed my head low in shame.

"You say you came back?" I asked. "Are you certain my men did not take you against your will? Speak the truth, girl, because I mean to question them on the matter."

"I came back," she replied angrily. "I came back for you. Yes, your men took me, but I was on my way to the camp anyway, there was no need for –"

"No need?!" I exclaimed, my voice rising again. "No need? Gods, Emma, you don't know what you do. You don't know how you hold – even now in your bound hands – more power than a thousand blades, a thousand arrows. You don't understand that I fear no man, no warrior, no foe – before you, I feared nothing and no one. And now you've uncovered a new territory in my heart, and shown me what it is to fear. Not death, but worse."

"What could be worse than death? You're going to kill me now, because my death will be less than what you've suffered? Is that it? If my death is nothing to you then I ask again, stop saying you love me. If you must punish me – and what for? for returning to you? – then get it over with. But don't say you love me."

She wept again and I could no longer hold back. I took her cold face in my hands and kissed them away, still torn between wanting to shake her until her eyes rolled back in her head and wanting to clutch her to me. And then, just as I was contemplating that
duality of my feelings for her, the anger was gone. She was back. She came back for me. I pulled away and looked into her eyes.

"Is it true? You came back for me?"

"It's true," she replied plainly. "Do you still intend to kill me for it?"

"Emma," I breathed, suddenly filled with remorse where the anger had slipped away. I untied her wrists and pulled her hands free and then I went to pull her to me. She pushed me away. I tried again and again she held me off.

"So you're not going to kill me, then?" She asked, her eyes burning with defiance. "Answer me, Ragnar! Or perhaps I'll hold a dagger to your throat and we'll see how –"

The answer was no. I was not going to kill Emma. I was not going to try to kill her. I was not going to hurt her – not just there, on the beach, but anytime, ever. It was done, I was hers. And she was mine. And there was nothing either of us could do about it.

Instead of responding I bent to kiss her. And she opened her lips to me in spite of herself, darting her little tongue into my mouth and softening under my touch for a moment. A moment later I felt her stiffen again and push me away.

"No," she said. "No!"

But even as she spoke she reached for me, pushing her freezing hands up under my under-dressings and furs and over my chest. And all of the pain and rage and confusion of the last two days came to a point between us, an uncontrollable avalanche of desire that we were both helpless in the face of. She pulled me down to her again, opening her mouth for me once more, laying back on the cold beach.

"You're slow," she panted, noticing my hands fumbling with the ties on my leathers. "Why are you so slow Rag–"

But I kissed her again before she could finish, and pushed the linens up over her thighs, too desperate to worry about the cold. She gasped when my hands found their way to her breasts, shocked by the chill of them, but still she pushed up to me, still she gave herself to me in the only way I wanted.

I groaned when she opened her legs and I sank into her impossibly warm, slippery depths, and again when her sighs began to ring in my ears.

It didn't take long. She rocked her hips up to me faster and faster, her breaths starting to come quick and fast, her back arching up off the cold, wet sand.

And then she grabbed frantically at my furs, burying her face into them and screaming for me, writhing against me like a wild thing. The first little pulses around me were as quick and light as butterfly wings. But when the pleasure took her fully they became more powerful, deeper, teasing and pulling and begging the essence out of me until I pinned her down and let the dam break, filling her with every drop. It seemed almost as if it would go on forever, the sweet agony of the peak continuing as I emptied myself inside her, each throb more intense, more blissful than the last. And then, finally, she had everything. She had all of me. Not just the parts that slickened her thighs, either, but everything. My heart, my soul, all of my hopes and dreams for my life.

We had to dress quickly, before the frostbite came to our tenderest parts – and mine still not fully recovered from the time in the marsh!

"Tell me you're not a spirit," I whispered, pulling her face close to mine before I called
my men back. "Emma, tell me you're here, tell me I'm not in the next world already."

She smiled a little smile up at me. "I'm not a spirit, Ragnar. You're not in the next world."
I rode south on horseback with Ragnar, safe against his chest as the winter sun came out from behind the clouds and brought, for the first time that year, the first whispers of the spring on her rays.

We were happy, the Viking and I. It wasn't the screaming, fist-pumping happiness of your football team winning, it wasn't showy, it didn't need to be spoken of. But it was there, radiating between and out of us, the pure, quiet joy of being with the person you would rather be with above all others. Jarl Ragnar's men rode behind us by a short distance, letting their Jarl lead the way south in the sunshine, with his woman in his arms.

Just before we arrived back at the camp Ragnar spotted his horse loose in the woods and dismounted to bring the beast back with us.

"Why is he out here?" I asked, knowing the Vikings were usually very careful with their animals.

"I let him go," Ragnar told me. "Back in the marsh, when I could go no further with him, I let him go."

"You meant to walk across the marshes?" I asked, confused. "But –"

The Jarl smiled and took my hand in his, as I was still on horseback and he was now on foot leading two horses, to kiss my palm. "I wasn't thinking straight, girl. I was crazed. The men found me half-dead, half-frozen in the middle of the marshlands. Don't leave me again, or I'll probably travel south and try to cross one of the great deserts without water or a head-covering to keep the sun from burning me up."

His men were close to us, then – within earshot – so I held my questions back, not wanting to force Ragnar to speak of personal matters in front of them.

Later that night, when our bellies were full of stewed venison, bread, cheese and dark ale and our bodies were sated after taking our fill of each other, we lay on the furs in the roundhouse, watching the flames dance in the fire-pit.

"Don't leave me again," Ragnar said once more, pulling me back against him and kissing my bare shoulder. "I've seen how I am now, without you. I don't wish it ever again. Promise me, girl. Promise me you'll not leave."

I leaned back into him and thought of my family. It was too soon for things to have settled for them, and I knew poor Katie had quite a task ahead of her in convincing our
parents that I was fine. I also knew she would be successful, because even if they didn't believe her words they would come to see from her lack of worry that she did, in fact, know I was safe. But I could not promise Ragnar what he asked of me. Not exactly.

"I cannot make that promise," I told him. "But I can make a slightly different one."

He smiled ruefully. "Ah, I should have guessed it. You haven't come back to make life easy for me, have you?"

"I can promise I won't leave again without your permission," I said. "I can promise it won't be a surprise – I won't do that to you again."

"And what if I don't give my permission, foreigner?"

"Then maybe I'll take you with me."

I meant to keep the promise I had just made. Ragnar's pain at even my brief absence was too evident, too strong to deny. I loved him, and I wasn't going to hurt him like that again. Even if it meant taking him with me to the future? Maybe so. That bridge could be crossed if and when we ever got to it.

"I would like to meet your parents," he said. "I would like to thank them for bringing you into the world, for bringing you up so full of fire and wit."

"Maybe you will," I mused quietly. "And my sister, too. She'd like you, I think. Maybe a little too much. We might have to bring her one of the warriors, to keep her distracted."

We fell again into the warm, comfortable quiet of being together – until I remembered the question I'd intended to ask as we arrived back at camp.

"Ragnar?" I asked, checking if he was still awake.

"Mmm? What is it, girl?"

"Were you exaggerating earlier, when you said the men found you 'half-dead' in the marsh?"

I rolled over so I could look into his blue eyes and he answered me plainly:

"No. Why do you ask me about this? Do you think it strange?"

"But what if the men hadn't come back for you?" I continued. "Are you saying –"

"I'm saying I would be in the next world now, girl. I was too taken up with the loss of you to pay attention to anything else – even survival."

"And what did you mean when you said there are worse fates than death? What is a worse fate than death?"

Ragnar rolled me over onto my back and let his eyes roam over my naked body before gazing, once again, up at me. "Loss, girl. That's what I meant. It felt that way in the marsh, as I lay imagining that I heard your voice whispering in my ear – I felt that I would happily die if it meant staying with the sound of your sweet sighs, that I would not mourn a life spent without you." He pushed his big, rough fingers between my own, entwining our hands together. "And now, lying here with you, I see what my mother drove at when she spoke of necessity."

"Of necessity?" I asked, stretching out beside my Jarl, luxuriating in our perfect closeness.

"Necessity, yes. My mother said that's how I would know when I loved. When I found the girl who was necessary to me, as necessary as bread, as breath and slumber. This is what you are to me, now. It feels we are not so much even separate people right now,
"It does," I whispered, very quietly, as sleep stole over me and I nestled a little closer in Ragnar's arms, smiling without even realizing it.
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