

MADDIE AND THE NORSEMAN EXCERPT:

Both men wore just what Maddie would have expected Viking men to wear when they weren't in a battle. Ivar's baggy breeches were caught tight about his ankles, while the visitor had tucked his into calf-high boots of leather. Their buttonless long-sleeved shirts reached to their thighs, secured about the waist by a leather belt. The visitor had a cloak fixed on one shoulder by a brooch with an intricate pattern on it, indecipherable in the shadows thrown by the lamplight.

The newcomer glanced up and caught Maddie's gaze. A tingling sensation rippled the length of her spine. Nothing like that had ever happened to her before, and her breath caught somewhere halfway up her throat. "What do you intend doing with the women?" he asked as he passed both necklaces back to Ivar.

Ivar looked just as bemused as he had when they'd first told their ridiculous lie. "What do you suggest I do with them, Erik?"

Erik? That figured. The shortness of breath returned. Somehow Maddie had known all along that would be his name. She'd always had a thing for the name, and knew that if ever she were fortunate enough to have a son he would be called Erik. It embodied all her ideas of what a Viking was and what he did. Erik the Red, who colonised Greenland, Leif Ericson who landed on what he called Vinland—both Vikings of great repute.

For the first time a touch of amusement crossed the craggy features. "Now, I could suggest a few things. If, as they say, they arrived here through no plan of their own, but were sent here by the god Thor, then I would say it has been ordained that they belong to you."

"Now, just a minute," Maddie cried. "We belong to no one."

Amber, who had been very quietly sitting with her hands clenched on her lap, now grabbed Maddie's arm. She looked even more frightened, her lips trembling again.

Erik's eyebrows went up, and he made a soft sound of derision. "Then I suggest you leave." He waved one of those large hands again. The stab of pain Maddie felt at his harsh words was stupid. Hadn't they wanted to get out and away?

Amber tugged on Maddie's wrist. "Right, let's go. We don't want to wait around for them to change their minds. And the chances of getting the necklets back now are slim."

"But where will you go?" Ivar asked. His frown showed real concern. Maddie warmed to the man—he really did seem to be a kind-hearted soul.

"Anywhere," Amber muttered.

Maddie resisted the pull on her wrist. "He's right, you know. Just where will we go? We can hardly wander around Jorvik looking for somewhere to stay. If, as I imagine, it's as it was in..." Maddie chewed on her lip and turned to Ivar. "What year is this?" She quivered inside as she waited for his answer.

Erik made a soft sound of derision, but Ivar answered, "It is eight seventy-nine." He was obviously well educated or he would probably not know the date. The quivering inside Maddie turned into a full-fledged tremble.

Amber looked as if it was her turn to faint as she whispered, "Ye gods."

"Likewise." Maddie rubbed at her eyes with her fingertips. This was taking on the proportions of an unbelievable flight of the imagination. "Do you mind if we take a look outside your door?" she turned to ask their reluctant host.

He nodded, looking more confused than ever. Erik bent close to his friend and muttered something Maddie didn't catch. She hoped he wasn't encouraging Ivar to push them out and lock the door on them. Their chances of finding another haven were pretty slim. Sure, they'd wanted to escape, but the more she thought about it, Maddie knew that the devil they knew was far better than one they didn't.

And there was another reason she didn't wish to leave after all—a reason she wasn't about to delve into right now.

Ivar seemed a very charitable man, even if his friend didn't. They'd been very lucky to land in his workroom, and Maddie dared not contemplate what their fate could have been if they'd ended up in the hall of a group of drunken warriors.

Ivar picked up the lamp and went ahead of them into the workroom. Erik stayed behind in the living room, holding the curtain aside. Maddie felt his gaze on them as they crossed the small space. As Ivar pushed the bar from its slots, she glanced back. With the firelight behind him she couldn't see Erik's expression.

Ivar opened the door and gestured for them to go before him. Maddie's knees wobbled as she stepped forward. It was very dark, the moon hidden by clouds so that all she could make out was a rooftop about twenty feet away with a coil of smoke rising from its centre.

A cool gust of wind swept along the narrow street that was made up of slats of worn timber, and she shivered. "What season are we in?" she turned to ask Ivar as an owl hooted mournfully and a dog barked in the distance. The smell of wood-smoke, damp leaves, and cooked meat filled the crisp night air.

He shrugged, looking baffled by the question. "Winter is just over and we are heading for spring."

If we go out there," she said to Amber, "we not only have nowhere to go, but we'll freeze to death in these garments. I don't know about you, but I reckon we're far better off staying here if Ivar's willing to let us. I suggest we hang on—at least until tomorrow."

Amber was peering around the doorway, clinging to the wooden frame as if she feared they might float off into the night if she let go. "You're right," she whispered in a shaky little voice. She held onto Maddie's arm for dear life, and Maddie felt her shivers. "He seems pretty

trustworthy. I'm not so sure about his mate in there though." She jerked her head in the direction of the other room.

"He'll probably go soon." Maddie turned to Ivar. "Could we stay here this night, please?" Whether it was her imagination or not she wasn't sure, but he looked pleased with that question.