

CHAPTER 1



Magnus pounded his large fist on the table, causing the trenchers full of food to bounce, the mead-filled tankards to slosh their contents all over the roughhewn surface, and startling the serving wenches so badly that one of the maids burst into tears. “Here now, girl. None of that!” Magnus’s deep booming voice echoed throughout the large hall, and those in attendance feared his temper would be directed toward them next as they scurried about their duties, trying to anticipate the needs of their jarl before he demanded something of them.

Erik guffawed as the female thrall scurried from the hall, then he frowned as he faced the other man. “You need not pound your fist, Magnus. I am not a wench to flee from your temper.”

Far from being displeased, Magnus found the comment hilariously funny. The two men had battled each other for years, and only recently united to do battle with a common enemy, defeating him soundly and confiscating his lands. “My son Ulf will be home ere long, and by Odin, I will see him wed to your daughter, Erik. Tis time for him to leave the raiding to others and begin his line,” Magnus stated with firm resolve, his entire bearing giving credence to the truth of his words.

“Your son is reputed to be fierce in battle, without mercy. I would not see my youngest wed to an ogre.” Whilst Erik did not often show his feelings, his youngest daughter was his favorite child and he would see her protected from any man who would take his fists to her in anger. Magnus’ son was a fearsome enemy when he chose to be.

“You mean to see your child the master of her home?” Magnus was properly shocked by the very idea. His blue eyes glittered and his red beard fairly bristled with indignation. He would not permit his son to marry a female of this nature.

“Nay.” Erik shook his head sadly. “But it will take a special man to master my youngest daughter. He will have to capture her heart and tame her spirit, but I would not see that done by his fist.”

Magnus pondered that thought, and then smiled in understanding. He had raised seven daughters himself. “I have never thought a fist necessary when a strap across the rump proves most convincing.”

“Aye,” Erik nodded, pleased that the other man understood his feelings. “Your son will abide by that condition?” he asked, hoping the young man could be reasonable.

“It will be entered in the contract,” Magnus agreed. As a father, he’d insisted on that same condition for each of his daughters. ’Twas not necessary to beat a wife into submission when a spanking would do the same and not bring a wife to hatred. Each of his wives throughout the years had earned his displeasure at one time or another, and his son was raised to know that his fists could harm a gentle lass.



ULF ENTERED THE PUBLIC INN, and everyone hastily averted his or her eyes from his fierce scowl. It took little intelligence to see the huge man was angry and just looking for a target. Seeing none he knew, Ulf found a secluded spot at an empty table. He ordered ale

in a loud voice, and was promptly served by a female. Ulf noticed that she did not seem in the least intimidated by him, in fact, she dared to smile in the face of his ill temper. She placed the silver tankard in front of him, looking him boldly in the eye as she did so, and he thought her a brazen one, mayhap seeking to increase her fortune with a tumble.

The last thing he wanted or needed was a female cluttering his life, and to that effect, he turned his attention away from the golden-haired beauty, tempting though she might be. And she was very tempting, he admitted to himself as he forced himself to look away. He was content to sit and sulk and ponder the fates that sent him fleeing from his father's home when it was practically still night.

Ulf did not wish to wed. He was happy and content with his life the way it was. He was free to go raiding when he pleased, free to bed a thrall when the need arose. He did not want the responsibility his father was determined to foist upon him, and he did not want to marry Erik of Valgaard's youngest daughter, especially if she favored her mother in appearance! Ulf drained his tankard, and asked for another as he pondered his predicament.

The argument with his father had left a sour taste in his mouth. After nearly two summers at sea, he'd looked forward to a happy reunion with his sire and his siblings, especially his youngest sister Kristin, who was still a little girl when he left, and was now old enough to wed. Ulf had come home very wealthy, with gifts for one and all. But his happiness and delight at seeing his father and younger siblings hale and hearty was dampened when he was informed by Magnus that he was to wed within the fortnight. Ulf refused. Magnus pounded on the table and insisted, as was his blustering way, but Ulf refused to cower in the face of his father's ire. Many harsh words were said, and by pre-dawn's earliest light, Ulf was astride his stallion, and heading across the countryside he had not visited in many months, angry and spoiling for a fight with anyone who was willing to engage him thusly. His thoughts of

visiting other family members were put on hold for the time being whilst Ulf sought to solve the problem his sire was responsible for creating.

It would serve Magnus well if he were to wed a female of his own choosing, Ulf morosely decided. At least he could then pick a female who did not look and smell like a horse! Ulf looked around the room to see why the wench had not brought more ale, and spotted her off in a darkened corner, trying to fight off a man who was at least twice her size. It was obvious to him that the wench was shaking her head nay, and equally obvious that the landlord was not going to risk his own neck by coming to her aid.

Ulf shook his head in disgust, and then got to his feet. Quick strides carried him to the far side of the hall, and with one great hand he plucked the beauty off the other man's lap and pushed her behind him protectively.

"The wench said 'nay,'" he said in his deep booming voice. "Mayhap you wish to debate the matter?" To Ulf's great disappointment, the smaller man shook his head fearfully, and then ran for the nearest exit, ignoring the guffaws following him outside.

"Wench, I did request more ale an eon ago!" He turned his flaming blue eyes on the young woman.

"Aye, so you did." She met his gaze bravely.

"Best you be quick about your duties, wench, else the landlord will be taking a strap to your comely backside," Ulf commented, turning her around and landing a hard smack to the properly curved area to speed her on her way. The other men snickered, but were silenced by the look Ulf leveled on them as he made his way back to his table. It was obvious to a man that Ulf was spoiling for a fight, and none of them was inclined to meet the challenge.

Ulf watched as the landlord scolded the wench, and shook his fist at her, obviously threatening her with a beating if she failed again at her duties. The thrall tossed her head back, opened her mouth to say something, which Ulf was positive would earn her the man's fist, but then she seemed to decide to keep her thoughts to

herself. She picked up the tankard of ale and headed in his direction, setting it down with a plop in front of him, and sloshing the contents all over the table.

“How did you come to be in this place, wench?” Ulf demanded as she turned to walk away. “Tis obvious you do not like the work, and are lacking in common skills.”

“Tis obvious you are without patience, sir. It would be wise of you to drink your ale and keep your opinions to yourself!”

Ulf found it amusing that the tiny woman would dare speak thusly to him whilst the men cowered from his temper. “Mayhap I am not so impatient that sharing my bed this eve would be distasteful? I have ample coin.” He made his request out of simple curiosity, and did not have long to wait for her reaction.

The tiny woman picked up the tankard of ale and threw the contents into his face, and then she dealt him a resounding slap across his soaked beard. “I would not grace your bed if Odin himself decreed it!”

Ulf was shocked that she would mock Odin. And from the angry murmurs around him, he knew that unless he acted swiftly, the others were liable to bring her to serious harm. “Tis time you had a lesson, wench,” he stated, and without further ado reached out to pull her down over his left thigh.

“Nay! Do not!” she protested, struggling to free herself from his hold.

“Tis a lesson you are needing, wench!” Ulf growled the words at her, aware that the others were watching intently to make sure she would be punished for her blasphemy. He was suddenly aware of two things; she was not wearing a belt like others of her class, and her garments were too fine for those of a lower class. He pushed up her apron, then her kirtle, to reveal the thin underdress she wore. Ulf would not subject her to the immodesty of baring her in front of a hall full of strange men, it did not matter what her crime was. It would not be necessary in order to make his feelings known to her.

“You do not dare to do this!” she screeched in pure temper.

“I dare,” he assured her, and then brought his large hand down on her bottom with a satisfying smack. “It is either a spanking or the landlord’s fists, you foolish little wench. Would you prefer that?” Ulf demanded, already positive of her answer. “Would you rather find it uncomfortable to sit for a week or find yourself unable to move from your pallet for a fortnight?” His hand landed again. He wanted the girl to realize how foolish she had been, and he knew that a spanking would impress the lesson upon her in such a way she would not wish to have repeated.

Siv had to admit that she had behaved without regard for her circumstances. Even her indulgent parent would not permit her to use Odin’s name thusly. The Viking warrior’s hand fell repeatedly on her tender backside; she was soon reduced to tears, and finally to begging. He was not gentle with her, and she was positive her delicate skin would bruise from the deliberate smacking it was receiving.

“What have you to say for yourself, wench?” Ulf finally stopped the punishment to demand in a loud voice.

“I am sorry, sir,” she proclaimed, saying what she knew was required. She wanted to bring the painful chastisement to an end.

“As well you should be,” he scolded, spanking her again. He lifted her and put her on her feet, and then smiled when she reached back to try and rub the sting from her bottom. “You shall not be sitting to eat your meals any time soon,” he predicted, fully satisfied with himself for meting out the lesson. He dried his face and beard on her apron, and then ordered with a bit of humor in his tone, “Now fetch me another ale, and be quick about it.”

Siv wanted to reach up and slap the aggravating man again, but did not dare. She was positive it would earn her another thrashing, and she certainly did not want that. She hurried to get another tankard of ale, and found her way blocked by the tavern’s owner. His black eyes were full of wrath, and she found herself backing up in fear. He had threatened her with a brutal beating, and it seemed

as though he would do so here and now; and none would dare interfere since she had basically sold herself to him in exchange for room and board.

“You have been naught but trouble since I set eyes on you,” the tavern owner growled angrily. “He was not severe enough, and you may be sure that I will finish what he started.” His hands clenched into fists, but he managed to whisper, “Serve him his drink, and do not think to disappear. I shall not forget the beating you have earned.”

Siv filled another tankard and crossed the room, anxious to put distance between herself and the angry man. She placed the tankard on the table in front of the warrior, and then turned to walk away, but he grabbed her hand and pulled her down on his lap. She winced involuntarily as her abused posterior made contact with his hard thigh.

“If you sit with me it will give his temper time to cool,” Ulf said quietly, having observed the exchange between the tiny female and the burly man. He would not see her come to harm.

“Why are you being so kind to me?” she questioned.

“I am not sure. Mayhap I would ask you to wed with me?” Ulf looked at her soberly. “Tis obvious you do not belong here. My guess is that you have fallen on lean times due to the death of a parent, or another misfortune. I wish to choose whom I wed. You are comely enough, and do not weep when I scowl. Tis enough.”

Siv looked at him, her lovely blue eyes expressing shock and concern. “Are you mad?”

“Nay, just determined to have final word in whom I wed. I would not have the spoiled and pampered child bride my father has chosen. I prefer a wench with spirit, and dare say you have plenty enough of that.”

“I am spirited, but it causes even the most fearless of men to turn away. I would warn you that I speak my mind always, and should your fists find me, best to hide your daggers lest I turn one against you!” Siv warned, honest to a fault.

“I do not raise my fists to women or children,” Ulf said with great dignity. “I prefer using the flat of my hand to impart a lesson when necessary, as you have already learned this day.”

Siv looked toward the scowling landlord, and abruptly decided she would be much safer with the Viking warrior, even if he did believe in treating a grown woman like a child. “Would you give your word on this matter, sir?”

Her shimmering blue eyes regarded him soberly, and Ulf found himself unable to look away. The wench was far more intelligent than he had first realized, and he was excited at the prospect of taming her. “It is my belief, wench. I am a big man; I do not need to use a fist to ensure obedience from a female.” He paused to let her think a moment, and then smiled. “You will wed with me?”

“I would also choose for myself!” She turned up her chin in pure defiance. “I care naught for wealth, but for a man with strength. You have proven yourself unafraid of my temper. And you have said you do not wish a child for a bride. I do not wish to marry a man reputed to be cruel. I will wed with you,” Siv agreed, thinking it odd that both of them were sitting in this tavern because they did not wish to wed others chosen for them.

“It is done then,” Ulf announced.

With a confidence that Siv found frightening and reassuring at the same time, Ulf paid the landlord off, and sought an official to make the contract legal and binding. Ulf stood beside her, tall and proud, whilst the disgruntled man wrote the contract and told them to make their marks. Ulf signed his name with a flourish, proud that he was capable of doing so. It never occurred to him that Siv was also accomplished enough to do more than make an X. Without so much as a glance at the document, he folded it and placed it in the pocket of his tunic. “We will ride much of this night, wife. If you have belongings to gather, you had best be about it quickly.”

Siv’s belongings fit in one small bag, which Ulf tied to his horse. He mounted, and then bent down to easily pluck her off the ground

and place her in front of him. "We may be little more than strangers, wife, but at least we both made our choice. That is what we wished for. You will not grieve for anyone here?" he asked with consideration.

"Nay," she replied honestly. "Where do we go, sir?"

"To my home. I would get to know my new bride before subjecting her to my father and siblings." There would be enough time later to introduce the pretty young woman to his father.

Siv was not given to complaining. When the wind grew cold, she pulled her mantle tighter, and leaned against Ulf's broad chest. His back was broad and shielded her against the worst of the weather. They did not talk much, each lost in their own thoughts.

Ulf privately thought he had made a good choice. He had ridden for hours, and Siv had not once opened her mouth to make demands, or to complain. He knew that sitting on her well-spanked bottom had to be causing her some discomfort, and he finally decided that it was time to stop and rest. He carefully lowered her to the ground, and as she hurriedly walked away to seek her privacy, he called out, "Do not go too far, wife. Wolves inhabit this area, and would find you a tasty morsel."

"I will not stray, sir," Siv acknowledged, more than a little desperate to relieve her bladder after the long ride. Whilst her skirts were hiked, she took the time to rub her tender bottom. She would definitely remember not to swear using Odin's name in the future.

"I have bread and cheese, Siv, and a flask of wine. We will not go hungry," Ulf said proudly. He watched her eat hungrily, and his eyes narrowed in displeasure as his suspicions grew to the point of asking, "How long has it been since you have eaten?"

Siv heard the anger in his voice, and quickly apologized. "I beg your pardon for my poor manners, sir."

"I care naught for your manners, wench. Was the landlord not feeding you?" he growled, and Siv suddenly realized his anger was not for her, but for the man who had treated her so poorly.

"The landlord was very frugal," she replied carefully, unsure of his reaction.

"When was the last time you were given food?" Ulf asked directly.

Siv was ashamed. "I was permitted bread, meat, cheese and buttermilk every other day. And if I broke anything, or spilled mead, I would have to wait another day to eat."

"You will not go without food again, Siv," Ulf said formally, wishing he had something more substantial to serve her now, and also wishing they had not ridden so long and so far.

"I was not with the landlord long enough to suffer overmuch," she said softly, and then realized that Ulf's attention was elsewhere. He had his head cocked to one side listening, and she was amazed when he rapidly rose to his feet, picked her up, and shoved her up into a tree.

"I want you to stay there until I tell you to come down," he said in a low voice. "Do not let your presence be known."

"But, what is hap—"

"Be quiet and obey me, wench!" His voice was commanding, and gave her to know that he was used to issuing orders and having them obeyed without question.

Siv watched from her perch in the tree as several men stealthily advanced on the small clearing. Ulf sat there, seemingly unaware, and it was all she could do to remain silent.

One of the men stepped forward, and Siv recognized him from the inn. "Where is the wench, friend?"

"What wench?" Ulf questioned.

"Do not play games with us. We know she left with you, and you spoiled our plans. We wanted to have a bit of fun first, and then we had a buyer who would pay good coin for such a comely wench."

"The wench is not for sale," Ulf said firmly, calmly noting that there were three of them, one directly in front of him, and one to each side of him. He just hoped that Siv obeyed him and stayed out of sight whilst he dealt with the three.

Siv could see that Ulf's attention was on the three men he could see, but she doubted that he realized a fourth was slowly and steadily sneaking up on him from behind. He had a large club in his hands, and Siv feared for Ulf's safety. Without giving it a second thought, she let out a whoop and threw herself from the tree and onto the man's back, sending him sprawling on the ground.

Ulf cursed under his breath, and then drew his sword. The battle was short and over within minutes. He was a skilled warrior, and had acquitted himself well in many battles. The three men soon realized they were outclassed, and ran for their lives. Ulf pulled Siv off the fourth man and let her dangle over his hip as he put the tip of his sword at the man's neck. "Get you gone from here, and pray that I never see any of you again," he threatened in a menacing tone of voice.

"You will not!" the man promised. "I swear you will not. Do not kill me!"

"Go!" Ulf roared. The would-be thief scrambled to his knees, and then took off running.

"There!" Siv nodded in satisfaction when Ulf put her on her feet. "We gave them a bad fright!"

"You disobeyed me, wench," Ulf growled, furious with her.

Siv looked at him in genuine surprise. "I helped you," she corrected him. "The man you could not see was sneaking up on your back, and he was going to hit you over the head with a heavy club!"

"I knew he was there." Ulf's pride was wounded. "I did not need a tiny woman to defend me!"

"There were four of them, Ulf! You needed help, so I helped you."

"I knew there were four of them, woman! I told you to stay safely in the tree. You disobeyed me, and risked your life. 'Twas not necessary!"

"Do not be so stubborn!" Siv scolded, putting her hands on her hips and glaring up at him.

“Willful and disobedient,” he scolded back. “Tis best you learn now that this will not be permitted.”

Siv backed up a step from the determined expression in his fiery blue eyes. “I only wanted to help you, Ulf.”

“You put yourself in danger!” Ulf argued heatedly. “And now you will pay the price of your foolhardiness.”

“Nay! You cannot! You have already spanked me once today. I am still very tender!” Siv backed away from him, taking two steps for every one he took forward.

“Running from me will only increase the spanking you are going to get.”

“Spanking me again will only make me hate you and run away from you!” she promised.

“Hate me if you choose, wench, but by Odin, you will obey me!” Ulf snagged her wrist and pulled her, resisting every step of the way, over to the rock he had been sitting on earlier. He sat down, and effortlessly upended her over his lap.

“Nay, please! I am sorry!” Siv pleaded, even as she kicked and wiggled in an attempt to get free, and protect herself from the indignity he had planned.