

Northern Light

Chapter One

Crack!

I knew without looking that our mast had just been torn off the ship by the howling winds that circled us. Clutching to the railing of our Viking merchant ship, I heard a crewman's voice roar, "Rocks!" I had only a moment to feel my terror grow before the boat splintered beneath my feet and I was hurled into the foaming sea. I managed to surface, taking a choking breath of half air half salt water, before I was dragged under the cold waves again. I tried to kick, but my legs were tangled in the heavy cloth of my dress. Who knew I would go like this? I was as strong a swimmer as any boy and had never considered drowning an option. But as I felt my head lighten without the necessary air, I knew it was possible. My arms flailed in one last attempt to reach the surface and one slammed into something solid. In desperation, I wrapped my arms around it and was lifted above the waves by a plank of wood. I clung to my only hope and gulped breaths of precious air. By some miracle, I washed up onto the rocky shore of the very island that had torn the ship to pieces. No energy left, I collapsed on the ground and closed my eyes.

"I found her!" were the tense words that made my eyes open again. The roar of the storm had left, and I saw Einarr, a young crewman and my friend. He was standing and waving his arm as if to guide someone towards him. When he turned his face to me I saw worry in his light brown eyes. Relief smoothed his features when he saw my own deep blue eyes looking back at him. He walked over and knelt, resting an arm on his knee.

"Glad to see you're alright, Corinna. We were all pretty worried about you." He stretched a calloused hand out to me that I grabbed and was pulled into a sitting position.

I smiled at him. "Thank you." Pushing my long, black hair out of my face I asked, "Where is the 'we'?"

He looked over my head and nodded. "Right there."

My father's footsteps sounded on the pebbles behind me.

“How is she?” He asked Einarr when he had reached us. His hair, black like mine, was still damp and his steel blue eyes, that I always thought looked like the sky after a storm, turned quickly to me.

I smiled. “I'm fine, Father.”

He hurried to kneel down beside me and give me a warm hug.

“I was so worried you'd drowned,” he said, his voice husky. “All of the crew made it to this island, but I didn't see you.” He pulled me to my feet, putting a strong and steadying arm around my shoulders.

“Thank you for finding her,” he said to Einarr.

“We were all looking,” Einarr stood up and dismissed the thanks with a modest shrug.

“Well, I'll say thank you anyway,” I said, looking up into Einarr's face.

Smiling easily at me, he said, “You're welcome. I'm glad to know we still have our entire crew.”

“Yes, everyone is now here, thank Thor,” Father nodded.

As I followed Father and Einarr to the group of men that made up our crew, I wondered at Father's thanks. It seemed to me that the god of thunder had not been very helpful the previous night.

Once at our present campsite, I was able to sit beside the fire and try to warm myself, but the cold wind still blew through my clothing, despite the blanket thrown about my shoulders. A few crates of goods had washed ashore with us, but not many contained food. Our only hope of rescue was if a ship chanced to sail by the little island. And with winter hurrying to conquer autumn, that chance seemed very slim.

Chapter Two

The third day of cold, shivering, and trying to crowd around the fire dawned just as the others before. We had been watching as closely as we could for any sign of rescue, but not a sliver of a sail had appeared on the horizon. Then, as I sat by the crackling fire and chewed on the tough bit of food I had been given for breakfast, I saw something move out of the

corner of my eye. Leaping to my feet, I looked out at the endless waves and then began to yell, “A ship! It's a ship!”

I pulled my blanket from my shoulders and flapped it frantically. Everyone else scrambled to their feet and began waving their arms, calling out to the ship. It was our only chance of rescue and we couldn't let it sail on. To our joy, the ship turned and came towards us. As it got closer, the man at the prow called out across the water, “Friend or enemy?”

“Friend,” Father replied. “We were shipwrecked two days ago.”

“Then come aboard and we will help you.” The reply was followed by thankful exclamations from our small group. We were helped onto the Viking ship, and given food, water, and warm blankets. After eating, I sat against the side of the boat and sighed my relief. I snuggled closer into the blanket wrapped around me and looked around the ship. Einarr caught my eye and walked over.

“You mind some company?” he asked.

“As long as it's not the wrong kind,” I replied with a smile that matched the twinkle in my eyes.

He grinned, knowing I didn't consider him bad company. After he'd sat down he asked, “And what do you consider the wrong kind of company?”

“A crazy berserker, I suppose.”

“Well, I'm not crazy, so you can't turn me away.” Einarr ran a hand through his mess of auburn hair and looked at me with a teasing smile. I returned the smile before I heard Father's voice and looked up to see him speaking with the captain.

“I'm Bjorn Alekson.”

“Welcome, Bjorn. I am Lief Erikson.” The friendly young man was tall and strong, with windblown blonde hair and piercing blue eyes.

“I wanted to thank you for your kindness to me and my crew. We were on our way from Iceland to trade but were caught in a storm and, as I said, shipwrecked on those rocks.”

“It is no inconvenience. I thank God we happened to see you. There aren't many ships out at sea as winter is on its way and if we had not

come, you may have frozen or starved.”

“Yes,” Father agreed. “Thank Thor.”

“No, I meant to thank the One true God.”

I blinked, startled that this young man would speak of the gods so disrespectfully. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Einarr's eyebrows raise.

“What do you mean?” Father asked, frowning in what I knew was his way of showing disapproval.

“I have accepted the Christian faith,” Leif said simply. “I no longer believe in the old gods. I follow God; the only god.”

“I have heard stories of the One God, but have never met anyone who claims to worship Him,” Father ventured, running a hand through his dark beard thoughtfully.

“Well, now is your chance,” Leif said with a smile. “If you'd like, I can explain a little more about my faith.”

“I am curious to hear what exactly it is you believe.”

Leif's crew put up the sail and we turned toward the newly settled Greenland, home of Erik the Red, Leif's well known father. As we cut through the water, Leif began to tell us of his god.

“God created this world, as well as the first man and woman. But they disobeyed God by eating fruit from a tree He had told them not to touch. If they ate of the fruit, they would die instead of living forever. That was the first sin, and mankind has been evil ever since. But God sent His only Son to Earth so that He could be the sacrifice for us. He died on a cross, but on the third day afterwards, He rose again and ascended into Heaven.”

While Leif spoke, I began to wonder. What if this God was real? Did He really care so much for wicked people?

Chapter Three

The next morning, I leaned on the railing of the ship and watched the water flash by. The sail above my head was full with the wind that carried us forward. Footsteps behind me made me look up at Einarr. He

smiled a greeting and joined me against the railing.

“I wanted to ask you what you think about Leif's faith,” Einarr said. “I myself have had my curiosity roused.”

“Me too, but I'm not sure... Would a god really send his only son to save the entire world from their wickedness?”

“I don't know, but I want to find out more.”

We stood in silence and I thought again about what Leif had said. Then I remembered the night of the shipwreck. We had cried out to Thor, but had he saved us? I felt my heart twist. All my life I had never felt as though I could trust the gods. What made me think I could trust a different god? But as I stood there, I couldn't ignore the pain I still felt with every beat of my heart.

“Me too,” I whispered into the breeze.

“Maybe we can learn more together.” Einarr smiled gently.

I smiled back. “That would be nice.”

Then Einarr's eyes flicked beyond me and he straightened. He raised a hand to shade his eyes and looked out at the ice blue waves. I followed his gaze to a heavy sheet of gray hurrying towards us.

“Looks like we've got a storm coming,” Einarr said grimly. “I'm going to tell Leif, if he hasn't seen it already.”

Sure enough, in a short while, another storm was upon us. I grabbed onto anything solid and tried to stay out of the way as the men pulled down the sail and prepared to tough it out. The rain pounded the sturdy boards of the ship and thunder shook the world with deep throated rage. Our ship angled upwards on a mountainous wave, threatening to flip us into the brine.

“Thor help us!” one crewman cried out as a flash of lightning shot from the clouds and reached for us. But its crackling fingers couldn't grab hold of the swift long ship as we crashed down on the dark mound of water, cold spray coating our clothing with salt.

As my fear mounted, I too began to cry out to Thor, but I went silent when I saw Leif, standing solidly at the tiller, his face lifted to heaven while rain poured down onto his ruddy cheeks. His eyes were closed and he had a look of trust that made my heart beat again with

longing. Did he have such trust, such peace- in the middle of a storm- because of his god? Because of the One true God?

When the storm had ceased and men began to thank Thor for his mercy in sparing us, I kept my mouth closed. After watching Leif, I doubted our safety had anything to do with a god of thunder and everything to do with the God of all.

Chapter Four

“You will have to stay here over the winter- unless you'd like to brave the autumn storms,” Leif told Father as he and his men guided the ship into the fjord.

“You are right,” Father agreed. “It would be foolish to try.”

We were all welcomed into Greenland, and given places to stay while we waited for the oncoming winter to end. One evening, as we sat by the fire, Father looked at me with a question in his eyes.

“Corinna, what would you think if we decided to stay here? Sell goods from here instead of returning to Iceland?”

I was silent, thinking of our winter home away in Iceland. It had served us well, but without Mother, it had lost its heart.

“I think a fresh start would do us good,” I replied softly.

Father smiled. “I'd hoped you would think so.”

I returned his smile, but what I didn't say was that I also wanted to learn more about the Christian faith. If we stayed, I would be able to talk with Leif's mother, Thjodhild. The next morning I saw her on her way to the church that had been built at her request. I stepped from our small cabin and walked towards her. She saw me and her face lit up with a friendly smile, so much like her son's.

“Good morning Corinna,” she greeted me.

“Good morning,” I replied returning her smile. I paused a second before asking, “May I join you?”

“Of course!” Thjodhild smiled again and led me through the large wooden doors.

“You have questions for me.” It was a statement said with gentleness that made my heart throb again. I poured out all my thoughts to that understanding woman and she was able to tell me all she knew. Much of it was what Leif had said, but Thjodhild talked more of how a person accepts the faith.

“If anyone confesses that they can do nothing good on their own, and believes in God who sent His Son to die as a sacrifice for them, that God raised Him from the dead, and He is still alive, they are saved. They are made a new creation from the inside out. They become in that moment a child of the One true God. And when they die, they will join Him in His home, Heaven, where there is no sadness or pain. And they'll live there with Him forever.”

Thjodhild reached out to grasp my hands as the tears rolled down my cheeks.

“I believe it's true,” she whispered gently. “What about you, Corinna?”

Inside, I felt that my heart wasn't broken anymore, but was whole instead. Someone had healed my heart and I felt like a new person.

I looked up, smiling through my tears.

“I believe,” I whispered. Then I smiled wide and said strongly, “*I believe.*”

Chapter Five

After I prayed with Thjodhild, I hurried to tell Father. I was a little worried about what he would think, but he wasn't angry with me.

“I have no control over your heart, Corinna,” he said. “And maybe, if I learn more, maybe in time I too will learn to trust the stories.”

When night arrived, I walked to the edge of the fjord to watch the northern lights flicker on the horizon. Joy was making my heart flame along with the yellow, green, blue, and purple lights that shone in front of me. I had surrendered my life to an all-powerful, loving God, and I had no fear of Him ever letting me go. That truth gave me indescribable joy.

Snow crunched behind me and I wasn't surprised to find Einarr coming to stand at my side.

“I just talked with Leif,” he said, his voice tight with the same emotion I was feeling.

I smiled at him. “I spoke to Thjodhild this morning.”

He returned my smile and I knew no more words were needed. Then Einarr reached up and grabbed the Thor's hammer that hung from his neck. He pulled it off and with a powerful arm, threw it into the cold sea. It hit the water with a small splash and sank beneath the waves.

“A new beginning,” I said aloud.

“It's going to be different. Shall we learn together?” Einarr looked at me with more than one question in his soft brown eyes.