



A FATE
INKED IN
BLOOD

SAGA OF THE UNFATED
BOOK ONE

DANIELLE L.

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE BRIDGE KINGDOM*

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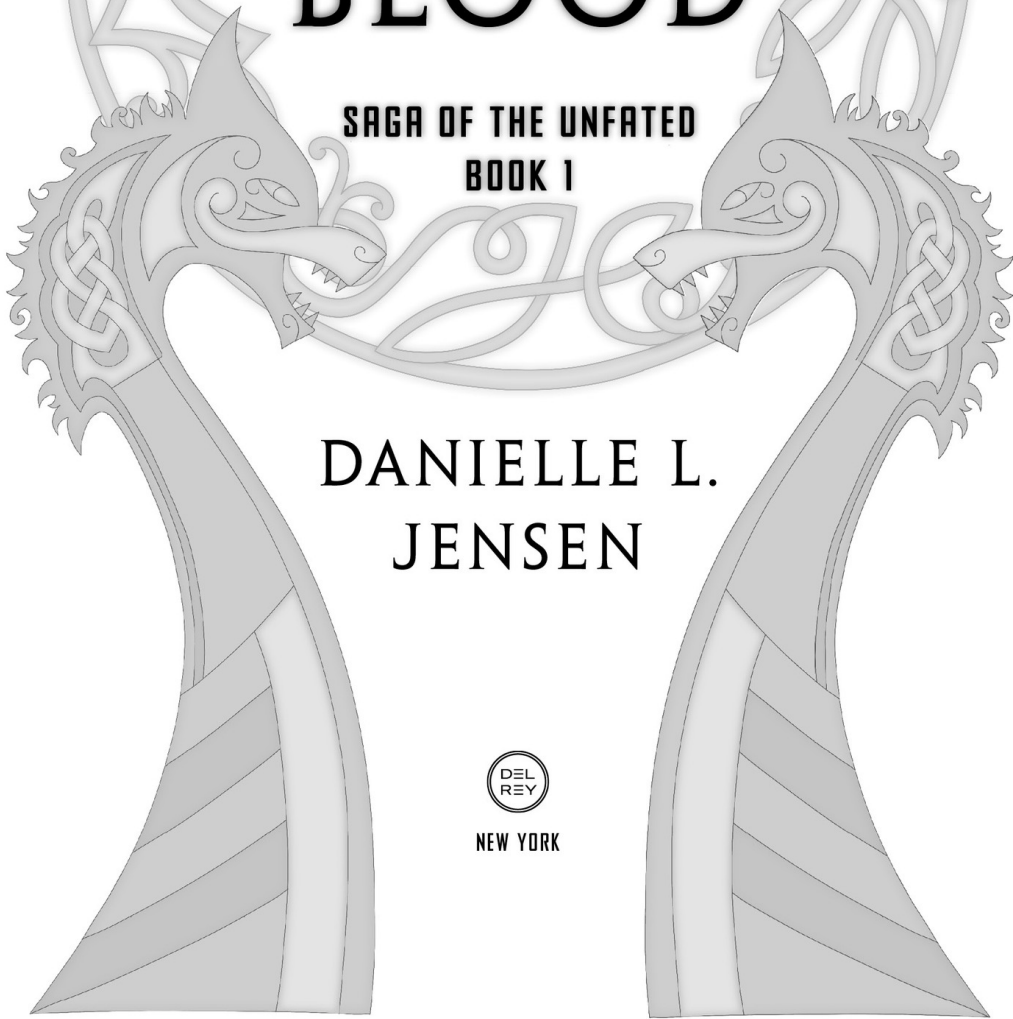
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NEW YORK



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My mother taught me many skills to ensure I'd make a good wife to my husband. How to cook and clean. How to weave and sew. Where to hunt and gather. She'd have been better off teaching me the restraint needed *not* to stab said husband when he proved himself a short-witted drunkard with an acid tongue...

For my temper was being sorely tested today.

"What are you doing?" Vragi demanded, his breath reeking of mead as he bent over my shoulder.

"Exactly what it looks like." I ran the tip of my knife down the fish's belly, its innards spilling outward. "Cleaning the catch."

Huffing out an aggrieved breath, Vragi jerked the knife from my hand, nearly slicing open my palm. Snatching up another fish, he opened its belly and scooped out the innards into a bloody pile before stabbing the tip of my knife into the wooden block, his technique identical to my own. "You see?"

“I know how to gut a fish,” I said between my teeth, every part of me desiring to gut *him*. “I’ve gutted thousands of fish.”

“I don’t like the way you do it.” His lip curled. “The way you do it is wrong. People complain.”

That much was true, but it wasn’t complaints about fish guts.

My *dear* husband was a child of the gods, having been granted a drop of Njord’s blood at his conception, which gave him powerful magic over the creatures of the sea. Except instead of using it to care for our people, he used his magic to deprive other fishermen of any catch even as he filled his own nets. Then he charged double what the fish were worth of the very people whose nets he kept empty.

Everyone knew it. But no one dared speak a word against him. He was Vragi the Savior, the man who’d delivered Selvegr from famine when the crops had failed ten years past, drawing in fish from the North Sea to fill bellies, ensuring no one went without.

A hero, everyone had called him. And maybe once that was so, but fame and greed had vanquished the generosity that had earned him the title, and now people spat at his name even as they honored him with an annual feast. That no one had put a knife in his back was mostly because he had the protection of the jarl.

But not entirely.

“We all do best to remember we might need his magic again, Freya,” my mother told me when I griped. “*You* would do best to remember that he brings wealth to your home.”

Wealth.

It was the reason my father had agreed—despite my vocal protests—to Vragi’s proposal of marriage. Yet instead of living to see his error, my father had died on my wedding night, leaving everyone to mutter about bad omens and ill-fated matches. If it had truly been a message from the gods, they need not have bothered: I’d known from the moment Vragi had stuck his foul tongue in my mouth in front of all the guests that this marriage would be a curse.

The past year had given me daily proof.

Except it was hard to cast bitter words about him into the ears of others, for Vragi was generous to my mother, paying for all her needs while my brother earned his place in the war band of our jarl.

For my family, I will do this, I silently chanted, much as I had the night I'd been wed. *For my family, I will endure him*. Aloud, I said, "I will do better." And because he didn't look satisfied, I added, "I will do it your way, Vragi."

"Show me." The condescension caused my teeth to clench so hard they nearly cracked, but I obliged, swiftly gutting another fish.

Vragi snorted, then spat on the ground next to me. "My mother was right—I should've married an ugly woman whose worth was in her skill. Not a pretty one whose only skill is her looks. Looks do not gut fish. Looks do not cook food. Looks do not make babies."

As far as the last went, *my* looks never would.

I spent nearly all the coin he gave me purchasing lemon juice and sponge from the traders who came to us from the South Seas, and if Vragi had ever wondered why his cock smelled of citrus after we coupled, he'd never asked. Long may his ignorance last.

"A year, woman. A whole year of marriage and servicing, and yet no son."

I bent over the board, gutting another fish to hide the angry tears threatening to fall. I'd never subject a child to this man. *Never*: "I'll make an offering." Which was no lie—at the beginning of every cycle I made a sacrifice to the goddess I was named for, begging her to keep my womb empty. Thus far, she'd been merciful.

Either that, or I'd been lucky.

As if hearing my thoughts, Vragi caught hold of my braid, jerking me to my feet. "I don't want offerings, Freya," he snarled. "I want you to try harder. I want you to do things correctly. I want you to give me what I want."

My scalp stung, only the tightness of my braid preventing him from ripping out a handful of hair, and my temper snapped. "Perhaps it is you who is doing it incorrectly, husband. That's certainly how it feels."

Silence thickened the air.

A smart woman would regret such words, but I was clearly an idiot of the first order as all I felt was a flash of wicked triumph as the barb slowly struck home. Vragi's face darkened beneath his thick beard, a vein in his temple pulsing like a purple worm. Then his knife pressed against my cheek, his breath rank as he whispered, "Maybe the key is to make you less pretty, Freya. Then you will have to learn other skills."

The steel was cold and cruel. It wiped away my triumph and replaced it with fear.

Yet...I couldn't concede. Couldn't allow myself to break or cry or beg, because that was what he relished: bringing me low. Instead I met his gaze and said, "Do it. Do it, Vragi, and then go to the village and see if they'll still host your feast and call you a hero when they learn you cut your wife's face to spite her beauty."

His lip curled. "They need me."

"That doesn't mean they need to honor you." And a narcissist like him needed that honor.

I watched the wheels of his mind turn; no doubt he was musing how much he could hurt me without consequence. But I refused to look away despite the cold sweat that slicked my palms. The blade pressed harder against my cheek, stinging, and I sucked in a sharp breath to control my rising panic.

He heard it.

Vragi grinned, my tiny show of weakness satisfying him. He let go of my hair, lowering his knife. "Get back to work, woman. When you're finished, bring two fish to your mother. Perhaps she'll remind you of your duties. It is her fault, and your father's"—he spat—"that you don't know them."

"Do not speak ill of my father!" I grabbed my knife, but Vragi only sneered at it.

"There is the proof," he said. "He forgot you were a daughter and taught you like your brother. Now instead of a wife, I have a grown woman who

plays at being a warrior like a small child, brandishing her stick and imagining every tree her foe.”

Heat burned up my chest, turning my cheeks to infernos. Because he was not wrong.

“Perhaps I’ve been complicit,” he said. “I’ve allowed you too much idle time, which the gods know is the ruination of good character.”

The only idle time I was allowed was the hours I slept, but I said nothing.

Vragi turned away from me, going right to the water’s edge, the fjord glittering in the sunshine. Lifting his hand, he invoked Njord’s name.

For a long moment, nothing happened, and I breathed a silent prayer that the god of the sea had finally recognized what a piece of shit his child was and stolen away his magic.

Wasted prayers, for a heartbeat later the water quivered. And the fish began jumping.

Only a few at first, but then dozens and dozens were hurling themselves out of the water and onto the beach until I could barely see the rocks through the teeming mass of fins and scales.

“This should keep you occupied.” Vragi smirked. “Give your mother my love.”

My bloody blade quivered in barely checked rage as he turned and walked away.

I stared at the fish thrashing about on the beach, desperate to return to the water. Such a waste, for there were more here than we could sell before they went to rot. And it was not the first time he’d done such a thing.

I’d once watched him beach a whale, but instead of ending the animal’s life immediately, he’d allowed it to work its way back into the water, only to use his magic to draw it out again. Over and over he’d done it, all the village watching, his eyes filled with fascination as he tortured the animal for no reason beyond the fact that he could.

It had only ended when my brother pushed through the crowd and embedded an axe into the whale’s brain, putting it out of its misery and

allowing the rest of us to begin the process of butchering the carcass, no one celebrating what should have been a glorious day of feasting.

I refused to feel the same sort of regret again.

Pulling up my skirts, I raced to where the fish flopped, snatching up one of them and tossing it into the water. Then another and another, some of them so heavy that it took my entire strength to get them back in.

Moving along the waterline, I returned Vragi's *catch* to the sea, my stomach twisting whenever I found a fish that had succumbed, each death my own personal failure. But there were so many.

Finding a fish still alive where it had tossed itself into some brush, I picked it up and threw it over my shoulder at the water.

Instead of a splash, my ears filled with a loud curse, and I whirled to find a man standing waist-deep in the fjord, rubbing at his cheek. Which I'd clearly struck with the fish.

"Was the fish hurt?" I demanded, searching for sign of the creature, concerned I'd killed it in my attempt to save it. "Did it swim away?"

The man ceased rubbing his face and gave me an incredulous stare. "What about me?"

I stopped looking for the fish and gave him a closer look, my face instantly warming. Even with an impact-reddened cheek, he was alarmingly attractive. Tall and broad of shoulder, he appeared to be only a handful of years older than my twenty years. His black hair was shaved on the sides, the rest pulled back in a short tail behind his tattooed head. He was all high cheekbones and chiseled lines, and while most men wore beards, he bore only the scruff of a few days' absence from a razor. He wore no shirt, and water dripped off a naked torso corded with thick muscle, his sun-darkened skin marked with dozens of inky tattoos. A warrior, undoubtedly, and even without a weapon I suspected he was a significant threat.

Realizing that I hadn't responded, I crossed my arms. "What sort of fool swims in the fjord when the ice has just broken up? Are you trying to freeze to death?" To emphasize my point, I jerked my chin at the thick slab of ice floating past him.

“That is not much of an apology.” He ignored the ice and moved toward the water’s edge. “And it seems I’m more at risk from flying fish than freezing.”

I took a wary step back, recognizing his faint accent. It was rare for Nordeland to raid this early in the spring, but not impossible, and I glanced up and down the fjord, looking for drakkar and men, but the water was empty. Moving my gaze to the far side of the fjord, I scanned the thick forest rising up the side of the mountain.

There.

Motion caught my eye, and I froze, searching for the source. But whatever it was had disappeared, likely nothing more than small game.

“I’m not a raider, if that’s your concern.” He stopped knee-deep in the water, his teeth bared in an amused grin. “Only a man in need of a bath.”

“So you say.” I cursed myself for leaving my knife on the cutting board. “You could be lying to me. Distracting me while your fellows move on my village to slaughter and pillage.”

He winced. “Fine, fine. You have caught me out.”

I tensed, ready to scream a warning to those within earshot, when he added, “My clansmen said to me, ‘You are not such a good fighter but you are very good-looking, so your task is to swim across the fjord to flirt with the beautiful woman throwing fish. With her distracted, we will be safe to attack.’” He sighed. “It was my sole task, and already I have failed miserably.”

My cheeks flushed, but growing up with an older brother meant I could give as good as I got. “Of course you failed. You have as little talent for flirting as you do for fighting.”

He tilted back his head and laughed, the sound deep and rich, and despite all my intentions to remain on guard and wary, a smile worked its way onto my lips. Gods, but he was attractive—as though Baldur himself had escaped Hel’s grasp in the underworld and stood before me.

“You aim as well with words as you do with fish, woman,” he answered, his shoulders still shaking with mirth as he walked out of the water, soaked trousers clinging to the hard muscle of his legs and arse. “I am so wounded,

I must remain on this side of the fjord forever, as my companions will never take me back.”

This close, I gained an appreciation for just how large he was, head and shoulders taller than me and twice my breadth, droplets of seawater rolling down his slick skin. I should tell him to go, to leave, for I was wed and this was my husband’s land, but instead I looked him up and down. “What makes you think I wish to keep you? You cannot fight. You cannot flirt. You cannot even catch fish when they are thrown right at you.”

He pressed a hand to the knotted muscles of his stomach, pretending to double over as he gasped, “A mortal blow.” Dropping to his knees before me, he looked up with a smirk, the sun illuminating eyes a shade of green like the first leaves of spring. “Before you finish me off, allow me to prove that I’m not entirely devoid of skills.”

If anyone saw us like this, there’d be Hel to pay if they told Vragi. And perhaps I deserved it, for I was a married woman. Married to a man I loathed with every bit of my being but whom I’d never be free of, no matter how much I wished otherwise. So I said, “What skills could you possibly have that I might be interested in?”

The spark in his eyes turned to heat, and my toes curled inside my shoes as he said, “Better if I show you. I think you will not be disappointed.”

My heart thundered against my ribs. This was wrong, deeply wrong, but a selfish streak within me didn’t care. Wanted only to kiss this charming, attractive stranger with no care for consequences.

Except that was not who I was.

I swallowed hard, shoving away the aching, needy desire demanding I allow this to continue, instead holding out a hand, drawing him to his feet. His palms were calloused and the backs of his hands scarred in a way that belied his claim that he was no fighter. “Wherever you come from, the women must be either desperate or foolish to fall for such nonsense. Be on your way.”

I struggled not to hold my breath as I waited for him to react to my rejection, for few men took it well, but he only inclined his head and said, “It seems you are neither desperate nor foolish, which some would say is

my loss.” He lifted my hand, not seeming to care that it stank of fish as he kissed my knuckles. “I say that it only means I must try harder, for you are a remarkable woman indeed.”

The brush of his lips against my skin sent shivers coursing through my body, my mind lost in the depths of those green eyes. Letting go of my hand, he reached up to touch my face, thumb brushing across the line Vragi’s knife had left on my cheek. “Where is your husband?”

“What makes you think I’m wed?” I demanded, but he only turned and walked up the slope, toward a horse I hadn’t even been aware was tied to a tree.

He pulled on a shirt before glancing back at me. “Your ring. Now, where might I find him?”

Instinctively I tucked my hand, which bore a plain silver band, into the folds of my skirts. “Why do you wish to know where he is?”

“Because I’m going to kill him. I’m going to make you a free woman so that you can bed me with no concerns for propriety,” he answered, tightening the girth before swinging onto the tall animal’s back. “What other reason could there be?”

My stomach dropped. “You cannot!”

“I am confident that I *can*.” He circled the horse around me. “You were right to say I am as talented at flirting as I am at fighting, beautiful. I will make it quick for the poor bastard’s sake, and then you’ll be free to pursue your every desire.”

“You will not!” I gasped, despite Vragi’s untimely death being one of my most frequent daydreams. “I forbid it!”

“Ah.” He circled me again, the ugly roan gelding snorting loudly. “Well, in that case, I will wait for him to fall victim to a flying fish. There will be some justice in that.” Giving me a smile full of all sorts of promises, he started down the beach.

“Where are you going?” I shouted, still not entirely certain whether he was teasing or serious, the real chance that he might *actually* be a raider surfacing in my head. “Are you going to kill him?”

Looking over his shoulder, he grinned. “Have you changed your mind about his continued longevity?”

Yes. I balled my hands into fists. “Of course not.”

“A shame.”

That was no answer, and I lifted my skirts, chasing after the horse. “Where are you going? What business have you in the village?”

“None,” he called. “But Jarl Snorri does, and he’ll be wondering where I wandered off to.”

I slid to a stop, every part of me wanting to sink into the ground, because my brother was one of the jarl’s warriors. If he learned I’d been flirting with this man... “You ride with the jarl?”

He winked at me. “Something like that.” Then he dug his heels into his horse’s sides and headed down the beach at a gallop, leaving me staring in his wake.