

SANDRA HILL!

THE LOVE POTION

"The very talented Sandra Hill adds to her already impressive list of reading gems with this delightfully funny and sexy tale."

THE BEWITCHED VIKING

"A humorous, adventurous, sensual tale!"

THE LAST VIKING

"A fun, fast-paced, page turner. The reader feels Sandra Hill's real joy in creating her story and the wordplay between the characters enhances the story."

THE OUTLAW VIKING

"Sandra Hill has written an entertaining battle-of-the-sexes romance that will keep readers laughing to the very end."

LOVE ME TENDER

"Leave it to Sandra Hill to take this fractured modern fairy tale and make it a wildly sexy and hilarious romp. Her fans will be delighted."

SWEETER SAVAGE LOVE

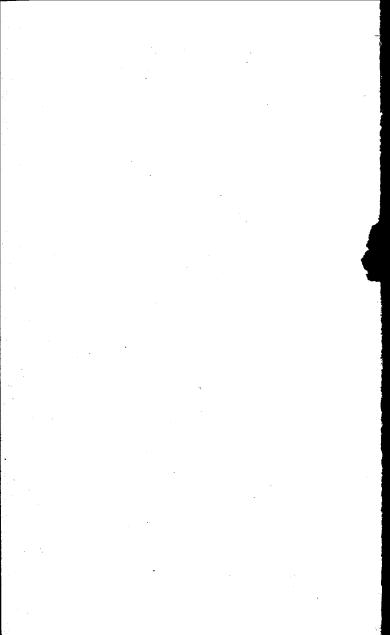
"A fast-paced, sensual yet tongue-in-cheek story peppered with plenty of dynamite dumb-men jokes and riddles. This funny and uplifting read will brighten any day!"

DESPERADO

"Humorous repartee and a high degree of sensuality mix well in Hill's tale of a wise-cracking poor boy and the aristocratic woman he loves."

THE TARNISHED LADY

"Sandra Hill has written a sensual, vibrant, fast-paced tale of two proud lovers, their entertaining battle of wills and the steamy passion that overcomes them."



DONE DEAL

"But your dialect . . . where are you from?" "Vestfold."

"Huh? Is that in Texas?"

"I have no idea where this Tax-us is. Vestfold is in Norway, I am a Norseman, A Viking."

"I see." Now they were getting somewhere. Among his other mental problems, this guy thought he was a Viking . . . although, come to think of it, he did resemble a Norse god. She made a few quick notes on her pad.

"We were negotiating our love slave contract when-"

"I never agreed to negotiate any such thing," she interjected . . . perhaps too indignantly.

"I have much experience in the bedsport, of course."

"Of course," she replied and immediately regretted her sarcasm.

"Now, I cannot claim great finesse in the more refined bedsport . . . no flowery words or hand holding or such . . . and, in truth, I do not favor kissing all that much, but I have been told my endurance is remarkable. That and my size."

"Well, this love slave business would never work, I can tell you that right away," she informed him with a nervous laugh, "because most women like kissing."

"Do you?"

"Uh . . . well, yes. Of course."

He seemed to consider her faltering words, the whole time staring at her with those luminous blue eyes. Finally, he said, "Agreed."

"Agreed? What does that mean?" she practically shrieked. He arched an eyebrow at the panic in her voice. "I agree to give kisses, and you agree to give . . . well, some things I want . . . nay, need."

Other Love Spell and Leisure books by Sandra Hill:
THE LOVE POTION
THE LAST VIKING
FRANKLY, MY DEAR...
THE TARNISHED LADY
THE BEWITCHED VIKING
THE RELUCTANT VIKING
LOVE ME TENDER
THE OUTLAW VIKING
SWEETER SAVAGE LOVE
DESPERADO

RULY, MADLY IKING



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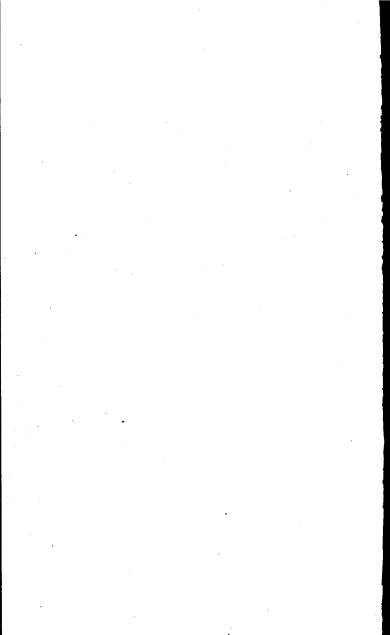
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This book is dedicated to my good friend, Katie Raiser, who died in the course of my writing this book. Katie's unfailing courage inspired all of us who were privileged to know her. She was an aspiring romance novelist whose dreams were dashed by the ravages of a deadly disease. Here's hoping Katie is sitting on a cloud somewhere, finally pain-free, polishing off a splendid manuscript. Better yet, wouldn't it be nice if Katie were the angelmuse working through the fingers of some budding novelist out here today? God bless you, Katie.

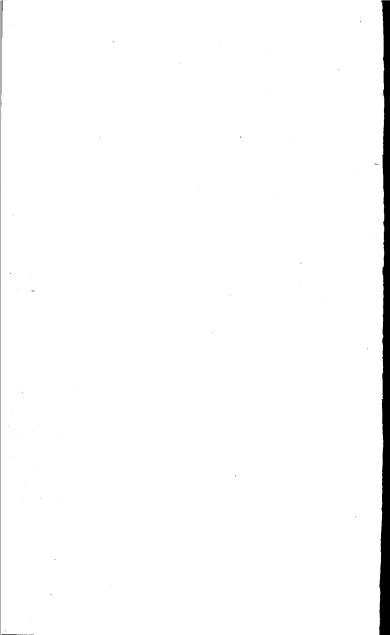


RULY, MADLY IKING

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"Most men are within a hairsbreadth of being mad." —Diogenes, 412-323 B.C.

"I have weathered huge waves willingly and fought winds through many seamiles to make this visit to you." -Egils Saga, circa 13th century



Prologue

998 A.D., Summertime in the Norse lands

Jorund Ericsson stared blankly at the huge grave mound. It was large enough to hold a longship and all the personal belongings necessary for the occupant to lead a good life in the afterworld.

A year and more he had been gone to the Eastlands, fighting the wars of the emperor of Miklegard. A lifelong warrior-for-hire, he had been part of the elite Varangian Guard, made up of handpicked Vikings from many nations. On the journey home, he had idled time away by standing under the banner of the Norse king Olaf Tryggvason, who was on the offensive again in Britain, spreading sword dew in his wake like a bloody wave. For Olaf, who happened to be Jorund's paternal uncle, this represented but a brief

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respite from the ongoing territorial struggles with the Danish king, Sven Forkbeard.

Some said fighting was a Viking way of life. Twas true.

With no apologies, Jorund acknowledged being a lord of swordplay... a mercenary, but not without principles; he stood only with those chieftains whose goals and standards he shared. Following this life path, he saw death as a constant companion and had long since lost count of the bodies that had fallen under his sword, or those of his comrades who now resided in Valhalla.

Still, he had never expected to find this upon his return to his homeland.

In his distress, his eyes darted here and there about the grave site, soon catching on the burial stone, where sticklike runic symbols spelled out:

Here lies Inga Sigrundottir, Wife of Karl Jorund Ericsson of Vestfold, Daughter of Jarl Anlaf of Lade. She lived but twenty and three winters. Died she in the great famine, In the year nine ninety-seven.

Jorund choked back a gasp. There had been no great love betwixt him and Inga these six years since their forced marriage. Nonetheless, grief and great shame overwhelmed him at her death eight months past. A man protected those under his shield, lest he be a *nithing*, a man devoid of honor. He should have been here to safeguard her wellbeing, whether from the dangers of man or nature.

But then his gaze moved to the left, to the two small conjoined grave markers that read:

Truly, Madly Viking

Greta and Girta Ingadottir,
Firstborn twins,
Beloved daughters.
They lived but five years.
May Freyja hold them to her eternal bosom.

Jorund dropped to his knees and put his face in his hands. He was not an emotional man. Once, amid the din of battle, he'd cleaved a man to the teeth with his battle-ax and ne'er felt a moment of remorse. He could not remember the last time he had yielded to the woman-weakness of crying—mayhap as a child when one of his brothers had hurt him in rough play—but tears welled in his eyes now.

The thought of Inga lying in the cold earth brought him regret that one so young should journey from this earth before her time. Regret...that was all. He was the one who had suffered most from Inga's renowned machinations, which had led him reluctantly to her marriage bed, but he bore her no ill will. She had not been a bad woman at heart.

Thoughts of his daughters, on the other hand, brought fierce pain to his chest and constriction to his throat. He had not wanted marriage. He had not even wanted children—but, oh, when he'd held them for the first time, bloody and blue with wrinkled skin, after they emerged from their mother's womb... well, he'd loved them on first sight. Seed of his loins they had been, but so much more than that.

The last time he'd seen his girls, they'd not yet celebrated the fourth anniversary of their birthing day. His longship had been pulling up

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anchor in the fjord in front of his vast homestead. Inga had been standing at the bank, along with his father and mother, Jarl Eric and Lady Asgar; his brothers, Rolf the Shipbuilder and Magnus of the Big Ears; and the family retainers. Greta and Girta had come dancing down the hillside at the last moment, their blond braids swishing back and forth, their hiked-up *gunnas* wrinkled and dirty from some youthling game or another. And they had been giggling. Odd that he should recall that now. But then, he reminded himself, was there a sound more heart-touching in the whole world than that of a giggling child . . . even to a hardened warrior such as himself?

"Don't forget to bring me ribands, Father," Greta had called out to him... as if she hadn't reminded him enough times the night before amid sticky kisses and little-girl hugs. "All the colors of the rainbow...please." That last word she'd added upon seeing her mother frown down at her for the girl's lack of politeness. Inga, daughter of a high jarl of Lade in northeast Norway, had placed great importance on courtly manners.

"And silk slippers from a harem," Girta had added gaily, ducking as her mother reached out to swat her with an open palm for her impertinence.

"A harem, indeed!" Inga had snorted, but then she hadn't been able to help herself and grinned at the child's outrageousness. Girta had been known for her saucy tongue.

Jorund smiled to himself at the sweet memory, even as a strangled cry escaped his closed air passages.