



VIKING GIRL

A FIGHT
FOR FREEDOM
AND PEACE

PAULINE CHANDLER

VIKING GIRL



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VIKING
GIRL

Also by Pauline Chandler

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For Si, Matt, and Ben

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CHAPTER I HUNTING

The nights seem darker here. I expect it's the trees; this Eng-land, from what I've seen of it, is thick with woods. Back home in the Mark, I could always see clear to the horizon in all directions, and spot an enemy from a thousand paces. Here I skulk as a thief in the twilight, hiding, forever hiding, ears pricked for the hiss of a Saxon dart.

I stumbled down a rough track, leaving the river behind, moving deeper into Saxon territory, and my hawk Raed stirred, restless, on my shoulder. *Tss . . . tss . . . there . . .* I stroked Raed's feathers to calm her.

I risk much hunting on the Saxon side of the river, but I have no choice: there's game here, I've seen it on previous forays—pigeon, snake, stoat—meagre enough, but better than nothing. My people are starving and I am their leader. What sort of leader am I if I cannot even feed my own people?

I burst into a clearing, took Raed from my shoulder, and held her high on my wrist. She stretched herself ready to fly, first one wing then the other, flexing her long yellow claws, digging them deep into the leather guard on my arm. *'Sharp beak . . . Clear eye . . . Clean kill,'* I whispered, pressing my lips close to her neck, then I

jerked my arm and sent her into the sky. *'Good hunting, stormrider,'* I murmured, as I settled back on my haunches to watch my Viking hawk quarter the Saxon wood.

Let me explain the lie of the land. The place we came to, where we made our camp, is near the coast, to the east of the river. It is bounded on three sides by water. East is the sea, north and west the river, holding us in a curving embrace. South, after a long stretch of woods—a day's march—there is marshland, dangerous territory, where you could sink into the bog and be lost within a breath. In the first weeks we took fish from the river and from the sea, but not enough. When I needed to hunt further for meat, I crossed the river to where the Saxons were.

As queen of my tribe, I should show myself openly to our old enemies, I should talk to them, now that the long war between Saxons and Vikings for rule over all Eng-land is almost at an end. In the north Halfdan has established his court at Jorvik. In the south, Lord Guthrum is on the point of victory against the Saxon King Aelfred. There will be peace.

But how do we make friends with those we have conquered? How do we live together? From what I have seen, the Saxons hate us, so I must be cautious: the lives of my people depend on it. We are a small band—thirty-two souls—and a long way from our nearest allies: if the Saxons chose, they could wipe us out before Halfdan's men come to our aid. My band is too weak to take what we need by force: we must trade for it or turn thief.

How I hate all this skulking. Nightstalker. That's what I've become. Shadow-walker. Robberwraith. It is not who I am.

I was Berengeria, daughter of Thorkil, king of the Mark. Now I am a queen with no land, an exile with a handful of warriors, forced into hiding.

I took a risk, on the day we arrived, stayed out in the open to build the home shelter, using a bright sail for the roof—the red and white stripes might have attracted the Saxons' attention—but after trudging our way from the sea, hefting our few possessions like a line of old beggars, we needed a soul-easing, so I gave the order to use the sail.

Grymma and Tyr, the oldest warriors, argued caution, but it was the right decision. I knew that when Helga, sail-maker, started to sing. Laying hold on the sail, she threw it open and she started to sing, as if she were back in the yard at home, calling the men in for their dinner. She sang the one about old Tostig and Etta the milkmaid. Do you know it? Saxons or no Saxons, we all rocked with the song as we spread the sail, singing all verses, every last one.

We made such a din as we worked, bending the branches of saplings and shoving them into the dark earth, as if we'd made a shelter like this a thousand times before. We gave a shout to shake the very gods themselves in the goldhalls of Asgard, as we chucked the sail over the framework, as if we were launching a new ship. Ha. That was a feeling. Brokk the smith complaining as usual when he had to find more stones to

hold down the sail. Brand, my hearth companion, and his brother Leif Ropemaker, stern-faced, drawing swords to stand on guard, though there was no sign of the Saxons, like the old ones watching over a party of children. Sigrid Ulfsdatter clearing a place for the hearthfire, warming the last of the ale and making us all have a taste, even little Gerd.

Asa, my loved stepmother, in all places at once, herding her flock, no longer of sheep—she left those behind in the Mark. Skar settling the hawks. And I—giving orders as if I had been queen forever, not just for a few days.

There we dropped anchor, deep in the Saxon woods, five hundred paces, no more, from the sea, and it was worth the risk of alerting the Saxons, because in working together, we found a way to safe harbour, a way to make home again.

Saxons or no, we determined to stay, and there we marked out our stading. I and my people, my tribe, my poor remnant, defeated in the last battle for the Mark, driven into exile, into an alien land. I prayed to Great God Othinn, often and long, to protect us.

My belly aches. Why did I not take the stale bannock Asa offered to me as I left the shelter?

I shifted my buttocks, the wet hide of my breeks chafing the wound on my leg, so that I squirmed like an adder. I was glad it was almost healed; things could have been worse: Great Othinn had smiled on me. I uttered another prayer: *send me food . . .*

That was a bitter day when we fought our last battle for the Mark. The wind and the enemy came from the

east, both blasting us back, ever back to the sea. The Jutlanders came upon us thousand fold, like ravening wolves. I fought with sword and axe, hacking through flesh and bone, feeling the hot blood spurt on my own flesh; I wiped one man's blood from my eyes—whenever the nightmare rode me I could still feel it—and I lost count of my enemies' deaths. I still saw my father's flag, the banner of Thorkil the king, its red fox flying out; I saw the flash of his silver horn as again and again he sounded 'Attack! Attack!' I felt the blood-shock again, when I knew that we would fail.

As the fight swung towards me, my companions—Brand, Brokk, Helga, Skar—stood at my side. It was not enough. Too soon the cry went up that my father, Thorkil, the king, had been killed. We had our backs to the sea and even the crashing tide seemed against us. Rocked by the waves, thigh-deep, I lowered my weapons and the others copied my gesture. None continued the fight, once I had lowered my sword, because, when Thorkil died, was when I became queen.

On the eve of battle, my father took the golden crown from his head and passed it to me, asking the jarl-companions to bear *witness*, that I, his daughter, Beren, should be queen, if he was killed on the field. I was surprised. Why did the crown not pass to my father-brother, my uncle Vasser? Vasser might have expected it. He was a strong warrior and, though harsh, a respected leader. He seemed shocked by Thorkil's bequest: I saw his sour stretched smile, as Thorkil held

out the crown to me. *Why me and not Vasser?* That thought didn't last the next swill of ale: as the cheers sounded out and I took the crown, kissed it, then passed it quickly back to my father, my head filled with dreams of gold thrones and treasure. Of course I did not think that my father would die. Nevertheless, I was made formally his heir, something I had not expected. I had no proper understanding of what it meant to be queen. I had no real idea of what it meant. I was a child.

Only then, on the field, when I lowered my sword and the rest followed, then, with a rush of knowledge, as if from the High God Othinn himself, I understood it. To be queen meant that whatever I asked of them, my people would obey. Wherever I went they would follow; they had put their lives in my hands. I had become their friend and protector. It was my task to fight for them, shelter them, rule them, and feed them. I was queen.

My uncle Vasser soon came to me, pushing his way through the living and the dead. Like a newly born foal, I was struggling to find my balance, and in that first hour of weakness, Vasser took charge—he was careful to inform me of every step that he took—but it was Vasser who bargained with the enemy to gain our freedom.

Under enemy eyes, I gathered myself, washed my sword and axe clean and shoved them back in my belt. Then I cleaned the blood from my hands, dashed salt water over my face, and took note of my people. Asa,

Thorkil's wife, my stepmother, had gathered them into groups on the strand. Worn, bedraggled, blood-spattered, they were pitifully few. I was queen of a remnant only.

The enemy spoke their loud words. We could claim Thorkil's body and do for him what befitted a king, but, on pain of being taken as slaves, we must be gone before nightfall. As I gave the order, Vasser shook his head, saying he had already sent warriors to attend to it. I asked Asa to go, but she was too late: Vasser had seen to everything. My father's body had been placed in his ship. As soon as Vasser's men pushed Thorkil's deathboat into the sea, Vasser said: 'Now we must leave. We must go now! The boats are ready. We shall go to Eng-land.'

'*Eng-land?*' At that time, I thought that Eng-land was another battlefield. We would simply leave one war for another.

'The north is already under Viking rule—Halfdan is king—' Vasser spluttered impatiently, 'and the south will soon follow. Guthrum will deal with Aelfred. Then the whole country will be ours. Come, get in the boat.'

'No.'

'Look, I know a safe place you can go to, not far inland, a good place, with water and wood, where you will not have to fight to settle. The Saxons there are quite willing to trade.'

He gestured to the crowd on the strand, some standing like stone, others restless, shuffling, gripping their

sacks and waterskins. 'Your people are waiting. Tell them what to do. Give the order.'

Am I to rue giving the order to leave the Mark? Do I regret taking Vasser's advice? I should have made sure the barrels were full. Why didn't I think of the food?

Vasser spoke urgently, with his hands on my shoulders, his face too close to mine. His eyes were steel-grey like my father's, but where Thorkil's eyes held a welcome, a loving look of kindly attention, Vasser's eyes were cold.

'I will not have to fight in this Eng-land?' I said. 'What about you? Are you saying you're leaving us? Where will you go? We need your warriors.'

'I'll see you safely to land, then ride south to join Guthrum. I shall be back as soon as I can, with weapons and provisions, and I shall help you to trade with the Saxons. Look for me before Winternight.' Vasser touched my chin. 'Beren. Queen. Make sure you prepare a warm welcome—'

He spoke as if to extract some sort of promise and my blood ran cold. I pushed him back. 'Vasser Wulf. Father-brother. Don't give me orders.'

At this Vasser smiled. 'Get in the boat,' he said.

I shoved him away. 'We shall leave,' I said, 'after my father's deathrite is finished!' Vasser shrugged and stood back. 'We must burn Thorkil's body!'

I set fire to a dart. I raised my bow and fired it on to the boat, already adrift on the tide. 'Through fire to Valhal!' I shouted. Others took up the cry. 'Through fire to Valhal! Through fire to Valhal!' and Vasser was

obliged to join in, nocking firedarts like the rest of us. Though few, we did our best: we filled the sky with them. Finally, when my father's deathboat was a small flame on the horizon, we gathered our belongings and boarded the ships. We crossed the sea.

Vasser was right. In the two months following our landing, we did not have to fight Saxons; we face a different enemy.

The time comes to prepare for Winternight, that time between leaf fall and winter cold, when we give thanks for good harvest, full barns and barrels. We should mark it with several days' feasting, but our boards will remain bare, unless I find food. Asa's barrels are empty.

For the first time I heard fear in her voice when she laid out for me what was left—a few rotting apples, some few bowlfuls of grain, spoil by seawater during the voyage, meat so high it moved by itself. There were tears in her eyes—she told me she had caught a chill—but she smiled too much and looked away as she spoke. She could not hide the truth: she, who tried to be both mother and father to me, was afraid.

So am I. It is not something a queen should admit, but it is true. I am afraid. If we do not find fresh food, we shall all starve.

We shall not die. I shall feed my people. I, Berengeria, daughter of Thorkil, so swear. As I spoke these brave words to myself, I took a draught of river water from my water pouch, to ease the ache away from my belly.