

Chapter 1

Dragons in the Sky

They came at dawn.

The sky was as red as blood and the clouds were ragged and black. The sea was as dark and oily-smooth as a monk's ink. The sails were dirty, dark smudges on the crimson sky.

I know this because my sister, Emma, saw them before anyone.

Emma sat on the cliff top shivering under her brown woollen cloak, which was the colour of autumn leaves. She knew she should run to the village and warn the people. She should hammer at the monastery door and tell the monks to ring the bell. Tell them to ring out three booming clangs from the tower bell. The sound of that bell was the message they dreaded.

“The Vikings are back!”

But Emma couldn't move for a while. She couldn't take her eyes off the sword-sharp vessels that slid over the dark water. The black clouds split and the jagged red sky between them looked like a monstrous dragon.

Emma watched as the leather sails slid down the masts and the heavy oars were lowered into the water. Three dozen men on each ship pulled powerfully on their oars towards the beach. She could make out the dragon's head on the prows of the ships. A



small figure clung to the steering oar at the back of one.

“They cut the throats of the old and they carry away the young to be their slaves,” Emma said to herself. “I think I’d rather have my throat cut.”

She knew she should run now and give the monks in the monastery a chance to escape. But her eyes were fixed on the ship that cut through the water like a swallow through the air.

At the very last moment, the young boy at the ship’s helm gave a cry. And then the men raised their oars into the air and the ships slid onto the pebbled beach with a crunch.

Emma took one last look and saw the men fixing their shields onto their arms. She wriggled backwards till she was below the brow of the cliff.

She snatched at the bridle of the white pony that was grazing there, flung herself onto its back and kicked it hard with her heels. The startled animal jumped forward and Emma had to hang on hard to its mane as it raced down the slope towards the stone walls of the monastery by the river. Emma’s dark hair came unpinned and it lashed at her face as she hurtled down the slope.

Smoke drifted up from the kitchens where Emma knew they’d be cooking the tasteless porridge the monks ate for breakfast every day. She also knew that very soon smoke and flames would be rising from the burning monastery.

She threw herself down from the pony and stumbled to the great oak gate of the monastery. She lifted the iron knocker and smashed it onto the wood again and again. After a long time a small door set into the main gate swung open and a thin old monk

stood there. He scowled at her. His mouth was turned down in a sour frown.

“So it’s you, Emma,” he said. “I thought you were on your way home to Durham. You left at dawn ...”

“Listen, Edmund. Vikings!” Emma said, panting. “The Vikings are coming. I got to the cliff path and I saw them! The Vikings are coming to steal and kill!”

The monk folded his arms and blocked her way. “You’ve been dreaming of your brother Symeon’s tales again,” he said. “You’re as bad as him. There are no Vikings.”

Emma’s green eyes glared at him. “I hope they cut your throat first, Edmund – then you’ll be sorry.”

“How can I be sorry if my throat has been cut?” the monk sneered.

“You’ll be sorry when ... when you see the sword swing down!” Emma snapped.

“My God will be with me.”

“Then I hope for your sake that he’s wearing armour,” she said.