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In the silence of night Briana O'Toole's deep brown eyes peered into the darkness. As she waited for exactly the right moment, the wind off the Norwegian Sea caught her flyaway hair. On the Viking ship around her other prisoners slept, but Bree kept watch. This might be her one hope of escape.

A few hours earlier, Vikings had drawn their longship onto a beach on the west coast of Norway. Now the two men standing guard on one side of the ship began talking to guards on the other side. And still Bree waited.

On that September night late in the tenth century, time grew long. Then came the moment Bree hoped for.

When a black cloud moved above the ship, the heavens opened, and rain poured down upon them.

At the far end of the ship the four guards took refuge under the sail spread out like a tent. Without making a sound, Bree woke her young friend Lil.

“Shhh! Don’t speak!” Bree whispered close to her ear. “It’s time to go.”

Silently they dropped their bundles from the ship. As they climbed over the side, the full force of the storm struck them. Wind and rain slashed at Bree’s face as she snatched up the bundles she had prepared. Giving one to Lil, Bree took the rest herself and started across the beach.

Pounding rain covered the sound of their feet on the small stones near the shore. In the dark of the storm no moon betrayed them. No stars gave them light. Staying as far as possible from other ships in the harbor, Bree headed for a line of trees behind a cluster of houses.

When they reached the trees, Bree pulled Lil into the shadows and stopped to listen. In that instant a dog barked.

Lil gasped. Reaching out, Bree touched her arm in warning. As still as the stones of the land they stood.

The bark came from a house close to the shore. In spite of the rain, Bree could see the dark outline of the back of the house. If the dog startled the guards on Mikkel’s ship—if the guards found prisoners missing—if they went to find Mikkel—

If, if, if. All of them held the threat of danger. And all of them centered on Mikkell.

Only one year older than Bree, the fourteen-year-old led the band of Vikings that had captured the two girls. When the raiders plundered a monastery in the Wicklow Mountains of Ireland, they carried off rich treasure. From the surrounding countryside they took captives for ransom or slavery.

Again the dog barked. If the guards knew something was wrong, they would bring Mikkell back to the ship. As his prisoners, Bree and Lil were now slaves. That is, unless they escaped.

The next time the dog barked, it sounded closer. As though in reply, a second dog barked, then a third.

Lil shivered in fear. "Can we climb a tree?" she whispered.

Bree looked up. The lowest branches were far above them. Even if she lifted Lil on her shoulders, the younger girl wouldn't be able to reach.

As the pounding rain changed to a soft mist, a dog rounded the corner of the house. Even in the dark, Bree could see its white hair. Head to the ground, it sniffed its way along the side wall.

Moments later another dog joined the first. Yipping between themselves, they moved back and forth, close to where Bree and Lil had walked.

Bree held her breath. Did the rain wash away our scent?

Kneeling down behind a tree, Bree opened one of her bundles. Deep inside was the small hoard of food she had hidden away. If the dogs found them, she needed to be ready.

Her hands cold with fear, Bree touched the pieces of flatbread. If she gave them to the dogs, she and Lil would have no food. Filled with dread, Bree started to pray.

In ever-widening circles the dogs moved out, their noses to the ground. Then a third dog joined the first two. How many *are* there? An entire pack?

Yipping and barking, the dogs came closer and closer to where Bree and Lil hid.

“Don’t let them see you’re afraid,” Bree whispered. But her own heart thumped. Were Viking dogs as fierce as their owners?

Once again she touched the food inside her bundle. At the same time she felt it was hopeless. How could she ever make friends by giving the dogs a few pieces of flatbread?

As the minutes stretched long, Bree heard a woman call to the dogs. Holding a candle, she, too, came around the corner of the house. With her hand cupping the flame, she protected it from wind and rain. When the light reflected in her face, Bree saw flaming red hair.

For an instant the woman glanced toward the line of

trees behind her house. Then a small boy followed her into the backyard. "What's wrong, Mamma?" he asked.

"Nothing." The woman's voice carried clearly, as though she purposely spoke louder than needed. But the dogs kept sniffing the ground. Though they hadn't found a trail, they drew closer and closer to Bree and Lil.

Without moving the woman stared at the trees, as though seeing between them. In the light of the candle Bree saw her look toward the place where she and Lil hid.

"What's wrong, Mamma?" the boy asked again.

"Everything is all right," she told him, then called the dogs. With a last *yip* they went to her.

Reaching down, the woman took the boy's hand. "Come," she said. "Back to bed with you."

With the three dogs trailing behind, the woman walked toward the front of the house. Just before passing out of sight, she turned. Again she looked straight toward where Bree and Lil hid.

Weak with relief, Bree stood there, hardly able to believe they had been spared. Retying her bundle, she slung it over her shoulder. With a second bundle under her other arm, she was ready to move on. But Bree forced herself to wait.

As the rain started again, pounding down upon the earth, the spreading branches of oak and birch trees sheltered them from the worst of the storm. From farther away came the crash of waves washing against the shore.

But Bree knew that without the light of moon or stars she could lose her direction. She could even walk in a circle back to Mikkel's ship.

In stillness unbroken by dogs or people, Bree thought about the lay of the land. In the last light of day she had looked up to the mountains surrounding the Norwegian harbor. Farther inland, beyond the peninsula where Mikkel's ship was drawn up on shore, the ground slanted gradually upward, then rose in steep slopes.

Now Bree decided that if she and Lil headed that way, then kept walking uphill, they wouldn't lose their sense of direction. Though they didn't know where they were going, they would be moving away from Mikkel and his ship.

"Stay as close to me as you can," Bree whispered in Lil's ear.

At first the ground was flat and open, then it changed so gradually that Bree needed to keep thinking about the slope beneath her feet. Dodging low branches, she made her way between trees. *Dawn*, Bree reminded herself. By dawn they had to be hidden away. When the sun rose, Mikkel would discover that they were missing.

Already, the young Viking had the broad shoulders and strong body of a boy used to hard work. Lured by the riches that pilgrims brought to the monastery near Bree's home, Mikkel had gone ahead of his men to explore the Wicklow Mountains. When Bree first saw

him, she thought he was Tully, a friend of her family. Then, while crossing a river, Mikkel fell and hit his head on a stone.

Bree still felt that moment of terror. Without knowing who he was, she had saved Mikkel's life. Soon after, he led his band of Vikings into the peaceful Irish countryside. Vikings took Bree, Lil, and other prisoners away on their ship.

On their dragon. In the voyage between Ireland and Norway Bree often looked up at the fierce dragon head at the bow of their ship. She had not grown used to its snarling mouth. She knew only that the longship took her away from her family forever. That is, unless Bree escaped, and Lil with her.

Escape they would. Bree would make sure of that.

Though eight years old, Lil's small, thin body made her seem younger. While she had dark blue eyes and black hair, Bree's hair was reddish blond and her eyes deep brown. When morning came, the color of their eyes and hair would add to their danger.

As the ground grew steeper, Bree realized that Lil was panting hard. In spite of their need to hurry, Bree stopped. "We'll rest a minute," she said. "Take long, deep breaths."

When they moved on, Bree took Lil's bundle and set a good pace. Her wet clothing clung to her, but Bree's thoughts raced ahead of her feet. *Dawn*, she told herself

again. By dawn at the latest, Mikkel and his men would begin looking for them. And Mikkel would search until he found them.

One thought kept coming back to Bree. *Where can we hide?*

The ground rose sharply upward now. As thick clouds broke apart, the rain stopped, giving enough light so that Bree didn't stumble over rocks. At first she climbed straight up, finding a way wherever she could. Before long, she realized that Lil still struggled to keep up with her.

In spite of her need to hurry, Bree slowed down. With all her heart she wanted to get as far as possible from Mikkel and the harbor. At home Bree was used to climbing the mountain behind her family's farm. But now a knot of fear clutched her stomach. That fear went beyond barking dogs and Mikkel coming after them. Not only did Bree hold her own life in her hands, she needed to take care of Lil.

For more than a week Bree had thought of nothing but escape. They had managed to get away, but now Bree wondered, *Where on this mountain can we be safe?*

Inside, Bree felt a knot of fear. As it moved up into her chest, she felt overwhelmed. In the midst of her panic she started to pray. "Oh, God, please help me. I'm so scared. I can't do this without You."

Moments later, like a whisper on the night wind, Bree heard it. *Don't be afraid. I am with you.*

Bree stopped so suddenly that Lil bumped into her.
I am with you always.

Tears welled up in Bree's eyes. If the Lord was with them, she could go on.

As she and Lil stood there, the last of the clouds moved on and a full moon shone high above the trees. Sifting down between the branches, the moon gave the light they needed. For the first time Bree felt she could see where they were going.

When they set out again, Bree no longer tried to climb straight up the mountain. Instead she walked at an upward slant, turned, and walked back at a higher level. With each step she took, Bree watched and listened.

Born in the mountains of Ireland, she was so used to hearing waterfalls that she nearly missed the ripple of running water. But when she heard it, Bree followed the sound to a narrow stream that fell from one rock ledge to the next.

"You first," Lil whispered, and Bree knelt on the ground. With all the rain the stream was running well. Bree put her hand beneath it, let the water wash over her palm, then drank.

The water was cold, and Bree splashed it over her face. For nearly twenty-four hours she had gone without sleep, but the water brought her alive. As Lil drank deeply, Bree's thoughts hurried on.

"We need a hiding place close by," she whispered.

When they first escaped, the pounding rain had washed away their footprints. But now Bree watched each step that she took. Avoiding soft ground, she stayed on rock, grass, or fallen leaves. Lil followed close behind.

Bree knew exactly what she wanted. A hiding place far enough from the water so that whoever stopped there would not find them. A place that kept them warm and dry. And most of all, a place that hid them.

Searching for such a spot made Bree lonesome for her fourteen-year-old brother, Devin. In the mountains of Ireland they had built a shelter in a cluster of pines. Now Bree tried to find something similar but couldn't. And she and Lil were running out of time.

As the first light of dawn stole across the horizon Bree spotted a boulder a safe distance above the stream of water. An oak tree grew behind and to one side of the large rock. A second oak and a cluster of hazel trees stood nearby.

Bree motioned to Lil. Instead of climbing straight up, they circled around, avoiding soft earth, and keeping to firm ground. Climbing down from above, they stayed on rock ledges and left no footprints.

When they drew close to the boulder, Bree found the hiding place even better than she had hoped. From below she had seen only one large rock. From above, she found rocks around the upper side of a small hollow. The oaks grew close enough to spread their branches like sheltering

arms. Bree and Lil climbed the rest of the way down and crawled into their new home.

In the hollow beneath the trees, Lil spread out her reindeer hide blanket. Bree pushed her bundles into spaces between the rocks. Deep beneath the trees, they found a dry spot and stretched out the sealskin tunics they wore over their dresses.

Bree spread her own reindeer hide between Lil and the opening into their hideaway. As Bree snuggled deep beneath her blanket, she remembered she had been up all night.

Yawning, Bree told herself she had to keep watch. Instead, she yawned again and wondered how she could possibly stay awake. She had time for only one prayer. "Father, hide us from their searching eyes."

A moment later, the great distance between Norway and Ireland seemed to be gone, for Bree drifted off to sleep.





When Mikkel woke just after dawn, he pushed his thatch of blond hair out of his blue eyes and looked around. Tall for his age and with skin bronzed by the sun and wind, he felt like what he was—the master of a Viking longship.

Soon after Mikkel turned fourteen, his father had put him in charge of a merchant ship that sailed from Norway to Ireland. Now the good meal Mikkel devoured the night before still filled his insides. The sealskin bag in which he slept had kept him warm and dry. Best of all, he was back in Norway.

Not only had he traded skins and furs in Dublin, he had raided the Irish countryside, stealing precious gems

and other treasures. He had even captured valuable prisoners.

Mikkel grinned. This, the first voyage he'd led, had been successful in every way. How could life be better than that?

What's more, he would return home with his sea chest filled with treasure. Chief among them was a bag of silver coins Mikkel had managed to collect.

Collect? Well, that wasn't quite the word. It wasn't what his father would call it, but for now it would do.

At the thought of his father, Mikkel pushed aside his uneasiness. No time for such gloom today. Instead, he gloated. *After only one trip, I am wealthy!*

Yes, life was good, and soon he would tell all those in his hometown of Aurland how well he had done. From this time on, his fame would grow. In the great halls of the North his name would pass from one storyteller to the next. *Mikkel, son of Sigurd, mighty chieftain of Aurland!* All would know of his brave deeds, his successful voyages, and his great wealth.

But now from the fire and cooking pot on the shore came the scent of food. Freshly caught fish, Mikkel felt sure.

Eager to begin the day, he slipped out of the sealskin bag. His sea chest with its strong iron fittings stood along the side of the ship. Taking a key from the chain on his belt, Mikkel opened the padlock.

Already wearing long, narrow trousers, he found leather bindings and wrapped them around the lower part of his legs. From the chest he took a tunic, a loose garment that fit over his shirt. To that he added his best cloak. Then as Mikkel started to set down his rolled-up bag for sleeping, he looked into the chest.

On the trip to and from Ireland he had eaten most of his flatbread, cheese, and dried cod. Even so, there still was enough to last the rest of the way home. There was also an extra cloak and change of clothes in case he got wet. But suddenly Mikkel knelt down and began moving everything in his chest.

Every piece of clothing was there—every packet of flatbread, cheese, and dried fish. And then he knew. His bag of silver coins was gone.

Mikkel blinked. Rubbing his eyes, he stared at the inside of his sea chest. *Am I dreaming? I have to be wrong.*

Once again he lifted each sealskin, every piece of clothing, even the smallest packages of food. *It's not here!*

Trying to hold back his panic, Mikkel searched yet another time. Finally he could no longer hope that he was imagining things. His stomach churned.

It was here yesterday! It was the last thing I saw last night—

Even to himself, Mikkel did not want to finish the sentence. But the thought pounded away at his mind. The bag of coins was the last thing he had seen before locking the chest and leaving the ship to visit a friend.

Mikkel felt for his knife, still in a sheath on his belt. From the deck of his ship, next to where he slept, he snatched up his sword and thrust it into a second sheath. With one leap he was over the side of the ship and standing before the prisoners who warmed themselves around a fire.

“Take them on board,” Mikkel ordered his men.

Mikkel himself had rounded up some of the captives during his raid of the Irish countryside. Now he saw the fear in their eyes. Just as quickly, they looked down at the ground and dragged themselves back onto the Viking ship.

“Line up!” Mikkel’s angry voice rang out.

Around the inner sides of the boat the prisoners fell into long rows. Some stood with shoulders back and heads up, unable to hide their anger. Others waited quietly, their gaze off somewhere in the mountains that ringed the harbor. Still others stood with shoulders slumped and heads bowed as they stared down at the deck.

Mikkel picked out four men from the Vikings surrounding the prisoners or standing on the beach outside the ship. All four had stood guard the night before. “My bag of silver coins is missing,” Mikkel said.

A murmur passed from one Viking to the next. According to their law, a thief could be punished with death.

“Search the slaves!” Mikkel commanded.

Two by two the guards worked, going down the lines

of prisoners. When the Vikings finished their search, no one could deny the evidence. Not one prisoner had managed to hide even a few coins. If they had once carried some money, it had been taken from them when they were captured.

But Mikkel would not give up so easily. "Search their belongings, and search well."

It took little time to go through the few belongings owned by the prisoners. Again the search turned up nothing. When they finished, the four guards stood next to the prisoners, facing Mikkel.

"So what do you have to say for yourselves? This happened on your watch."

Alf, the shortest guard, as well as the shortest of all the Vikings, stood nearby. In spite of weeks in the wind and sun, the skin of his face looked soft. When he pushed back his knitted cap it stood up in a point. Wisps of light brown hair popped out around his ears.

"It's the trolls," Alf said, his voice filled with dread. "I never thought I'd really see the trolls at work."

"The trolls?" Mikkel tried to show his scorn. Trolls were known for their long crooked noses, ugly faces, and the trouble they brought. Yet Mikkel didn't want to seem afraid.

"They came out of the mountains last night." With a round, smiling face, Alf always seemed more cheerful than the other Vikings. But now he looked uneasy. As

though afraid he'd spy a troll, his eyes shifted from one corner of the ship to the other.

As he looked over his shoulder, Alf's soft voice grew even more quiet. "If the trolls took your coins, how can we ever find them?"

Impatient now, Mikkell sighed. "How could it possibly be a troll?" Yet Alf's words started Mikkell thinking. In spite of himself, he glanced toward the mountains. Everyone knew that trolls were so tall that their heads reached above the trees. That's why they lived inside mountains, and that's where they hid their gold and silver.

Mikkell didn't want to get on the wrong side of trolls. They could bring all kinds of trouble into his life.

But the tallest Viking laughed. "Trolls!" he scoffed. Long and lean, Gunnar stood next to Alf. A scruffy beard filled Gunnar's thin face and reached up into the hollows of his cheeks. "You can't blame everything on trolls!"

"Shhhh!" Alf held up his hands to quiet Gunnar. "You'll upset them!"

"That's nonsense!" Gunnar turned to the prisoners. "Who on this longship took the bag of silver coins?"

At Gunnar's words Mikkell turned back to the prisoners. These were the people that he and his men had stolen away from the Irish countryside. Mikkell's gaze traveled from one man, woman, or child to the next. With each passing moment, Mikkell's anger grew. Without doubt he knew who was missing.

“Where is she?” Mikkel asked.

“Where is who?” someone asked. But not one prisoner met his eyes.

“Bree.” Mikkel spoke her name as if she were the most despised person on earth. Every prisoner and every Viking knew her name as well as Mikkel. And every person on board ship knew who was missing.

“The girl Bree,” Mikkel spit out.

Again a low hum passed between the Vikings. Mikkel acted as if he didn’t hear them.

When not a single Irish prisoner answered, Mikkel began counting. Not only was Bree gone, but also one other. Mikkel had watched Bree enough to know who it was. “The girl Bree helps,” he said. “What is her name?”

Again, no prisoner met Mikkel’s eyes. Every one of them stared at the wood boards of the deck.

“Where did they go?” Mikkel asked. He spoke in Norse, a language used by traders. Though the Irish spoke Gaelic, Mikkel felt sure that some of them also knew Norse. But no one answered his question.

Mikkel waited. “If you do not tell me, their punishment will be upon your heads.”

Still no one spoke. Like the stone walls that filled their countryside, the Irish stood together. Mikkel had no doubt they had agreed on what to do.

His steps quick and angry, Mikkel marched over to the first prisoner, lifted his chin, and waited for the

Irishman to look into his eyes. But the prisoner remained silent.

Mikkel did the same with a second, third, and fourth prisoner. Always Mikkel waited until that person returned his gaze. Whether man, woman, boy, or girl, not one Irish captive spoke. Not one of them hinted, even by the look in their eyes, that they knew what had happened to Bree.

Finally Mikkel stepped back. His glance swept up and down the deck, this time taking in each one of the Vikings. To a man, they looked off to sea or the mountains. To a man, they did not meet his gaze. Except for Hauk.

With his gray white hair, flowing beard, and beaklike nose, Hauk resembled a bird of prey. An old hand at sailing, Hauk had worked hard to teach Mikkel everything he knew. But when Hauk became sick, Mikkel made plans of his own. Against everything his father wanted him to do, Mikkel led his men on a raid of the Irish monastery at Glendalough (pronounced Glen da loch).

Now from beneath bushy eyebrows, Hauk's piercing eyes watched Mikkel. And there was something Mikkel knew: This man sent by his father to help him lead the band of Vikings wanted to see how Mikkel met this test.

Mikkel would not disappoint him. His gaze returned to the four guards and lingered on them. "You allowed the captives to escape. What do you have to say?"

“The younger girl is Lil,” Alf answered. “But the trolls stole the coins.”

Tall, lean Gunnar shook his head. “Trolls!” he scoffed again. “You can’t blame everything on them. Bree took the coins.”

“Yes, yes,” the two other guards chimed in.

“But how?” Mikkel asked. “My sea chest was locked. The key was with me.”

“She’s a clever one, that girl is.” Gunnar seemed eager to explain. “When the night was dark—when we stood outside in the rain—” As if that explained everything, he shrugged.

“So. You did not see her go over the side of the boat?”

“The sail was down, tied to the oar holes.”

Mikkel’s anger flared. He himself knew how easy it would be to slip out from under the sail at either end of the ship. But he wasn’t going to remind all the other prisoners what they could try for themselves.

“There will be no next time,” Mikkel told the Vikings. “If any other prisoner escapes, you lose all that you gained in Ireland. And for you four who stood guard so well—” Mikkel’s scorn curled around the words. “For you who could not keep two weak-kneed Irish girls as prisoners—you will receive no wages from this trip. No earnings from the furs and goods we sold in Dublin.”

For an instant Mikkel’s gaze flicked toward Hauk.

When the man nodded, Mikkell knew Hauk was pleased with his decision.

Mikkell looked back to the four guards. Like a smoldering fire, anger burned in the eyes of three of them. Only Alf still seemed convinced that the trolls had made a nighttime visit. Mikkell felt glad. Angry men would not miss an opportunity to find Bree and bring her back.

“That is,” Mikkell added, “you lose your wages unless you do one thing. Two Irish lasses should not be difficult to find and capture again.”

Mikkell’s glance took in the rest of the Vikings. “Now,” he ordered, “bind up the prisoners again. When they are tied to the ship, a third of you stay here. The rest of you spread out and find the two girls. Double wages to the man or men who bring them back.”

As Mikkell watched, his men tied the wrists of the prisoners. Next they tied a rope around their ankles, leaving only a short length of line between their feet. Then, using a longer rope, they tied each prisoner to the side of the ship. As the Vikings worked, Mikkell studied the four guards.

Gunnar seemed only too glad to search for the girls. The cruel light in his eyes warned Mikkell, sending a chill down his spine.

“Stop!” he ordered, as Vikings started leaving the ship. “Hear this, and hear it well. If either girl is harmed in any way, you will not receive your reward.”

With shoulders back and sword in hand, Mikkel waited to be sure each man understood his orders. As he turned from one Viking to the next, each of his men met Mikkel's gaze. But Gunnar looked away.

Unwilling to change his expression by even the flicker of an eyelash, Mikkel waited. "Understood?" he asked again. When Gunnar finally met his gaze and nodded, Mikkel allowed his men to return to breakfast.

The prisoners looked relieved. So, too, did many of the guards. But Mikkel held no doubt about how cruel some of the men could be.

Always Mikkel had been proud of the merchant ship his father built for him. Always Mikkel felt proud that his father sent him out in charge of so many men. But now Mikkel wondered if he could really handle all that was expected of him.

The thought lasted only a moment, for Mikkel had his own answer. *Of course I can. Didn't I earn that bag of silver coins? Didn't I add to all I earned?*

Once again anger flooded his being. *Bree will pay for what she's done.*

But then as Gunnar crossed the deck, Mikkel again saw his eyes. Like a stranger knocking at his door, a thought entered Mikkel's mind. *What did I set loose?*

For the first time in his life Mikkel hated himself. He alone was responsible for the raid on the Glendalough

monastery. Only now did he begin to guess at all that his greed had set in motion.

Like another stranger, a warning licked through Mikkel's veins. *If I want to be sure Bree and Lil are safe—*

Mikkel didn't want to finish the sentence, not even to himself. He had only one thought. *I must be the one who finds Bree first.*