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A sudden gust of wind whipped between the mountains, lashed the water into waves, and caught Briana O'Toole's reddish blonde hair. With one quick motion Bree swept it out of her eyes and turned to face her new life.

Just then a swell of waves lifted the end of the Viking ship as it rested on the shore. Moments before, this ship that brought Bree from Ireland had sailed through a long, narrow waterway to this settlement in the mountains. Now sunlight shone on a waterfall spilling over a high rock wall.

Then the sun shone on the blonde hair of a tall woman standing beside the water. Seeming to forget everything else, Bree's enemy, Mikkel, leaned forward.

The moment the Viking ship touched shore, he

leaped over the side. By the time he touched the ground, the tall woman stood before him.

Mikkel straightened to his full height and tipped his head in respect. “Mamma,” he said.

“Son,” she answered. A tear slid down her cheek. “You were gone so long; I was afraid.”

“I know. But I am here.” Relief filled Mikkel’s voice. “I am home.”

A flash of envy, then anger, filled Bree’s insides. *Home!* she wanted to spit out. *Mikkel is home, but I am not!* On a summer morning late in the tenth century, Mikkel had planned the raid that brought Bree and others from Ireland to the Aurland Fjord. Sometimes Bree wished Mikkel could be a friend. Other times she felt angry about everything he did.

As Viking sailors set down the ramp, Bree looked into the crowd gathered to meet the ship. There she saw a girl with sandy colored hair, brown eyes, and a dusting of freckles across her nose.

Who is she? Bree wondered. *Why do I think she’s someone I know?*

The girl looked too thin, as if she had been sick. Yet she had to be at least eleven, perhaps twelve. As people streamed off the ship, Bree lost sight of her. Then far up on shore, Bree saw her again.

A long single braid hung down on the girl’s shoulder. When she tossed it aside, her eyes lit with laughter. Bree

knew that motion, that look of poking fun at something serious. *Could it possibly be?*

Across the distance their gaze met. The girl's mouth formed a round O, a gasp of recognition. The surprise of it shook Bree to the center of her being. *It's my sister Keely!*

One year younger than Bree, the two had been close friends as well as sisters. Then six years ago Vikings raided the monastery near their home in Ireland and stole Keely away. In a similar way, a more recent raid had brought Bree on a Viking longship to this fjord.

Filled with excitement, Bree pushed her way toward the side of the ship. *Maybe there's a reason I was captured by Vikings. Maybe something good will come out of it.*

In that instant of hope Bree could see herself bringing Keely home to their family. She could imagine Daddy and Mam and each of her brothers and sisters hugging and kissing Keely. Tears would come to their eyes and stream down their cheeks.

Keely! Yes, it has to be her!

But the girl turned away. A tall Viking stepped in front of Bree, blocking her view. Filled with panic, Bree tried to get around him. By the time she reached the side of the ship, the girl was gone.

Bree felt sick with disappointment. *It was Keely, she thought. I know it was Keely! But if it was, why did she turn away? Why did she act as if she doesn't know me?*

I'll find her, Bree promised herself. And somehow we'll escape together!

In the next moment, Mikkel turned away from his mother to face the Irish captives.

“Stop!” he called out. When two Irishmen pretended they did not understand, Mikkel held up both hands. “Wait!”

Instantly other Viking sailors formed a line across the shore. No Irish prisoner would pass through that line until the men told that person where to go.

In despair Bree looked around. Here, where the ship had landed, rock walls gave way to a valley. Green fields lined the river flowing through that valley. Close to the river was a line of houses. But nowhere could Bree see the girl she believed to be Keely.

Now, like it or not, Bree needed to begin her new life. But first she wanted to say good-bye to the Irish friends she had made on board ship.

Standing to one side, Bree looked for them. When Lil came near, Bree caught her new friend in a hug. “Courage to win,” Bree whispered.

As Lil’s gaze met hers, Bree felt a shock of surprise. Only two weeks before, this younger girl had been afraid of her own shadow. Now Lil lifted her head and crossed her arms on her chest in their secret sign. “Courage to win, Bree,” she said softly.

“Wherever you are, you will be all right,” Bree whispered.

“I know.” Lil’s eyes shone. “And you also.”

Bree swallowed hard. “Mikkel said I’ll be his mother’s slave. I’ll watch where you go. We’ll find each other.”

When they walked down the ramp, Lil was ahead of Bree. Mikkel motioned Lil toward a sturdy woman with kind blue eyes. Standing there, Bree watched to see what happened with each of her special friends.

As a girl growing up in Ireland, she had always longed to travel. Often she had climbed the mountain near her home to gaze through the mists and wonder what lay beyond the Irish Sea. Yet in the days since leaving Ireland, Bree had begun dreaming about her new quest—being home again with her family.

Again she thought of her sister Keely, of walking up to their cottage, opening the door, and shouting, “Surprise!”

Again Bree let herself hope. *If Dev comes, and Keely is here—*

Ever since being captured—since watching Mikkel release her fourteen-year-old brother, Devin, on a shore in northern Ireland, Bree had clung to one hope. One year older than Bree, Dev had always watched out for her. If Dev could, he’d be here now, a bag of ransom money in his hand. When Mikkel boasted about his father being chieftain of the Aurland Fjord, Dev had learned how to find Bree.

But now a tall slender girl headed toward Mikkel. Like many of the people standing on shore, she was also blonde, but her long thick hair fell down her back, nearly reaching her waist.

As she swept forward like a queen before her subjects, the girl's gaze went from one Irish person to the next, and then stopped on Bree.

The girl turned toward Mikkel. "Who is this?" she asked, her voice sharp.

"Well, *Gee-nah*," Mikkel drawled. "What a way to welcome me home."

But the girl named Gna paid no attention. "Who is she?" she asked again.

Mikkel looked uncomfortable but only said, "One of the Irish."

Stepping forward, Gna reached out her hand and tipped up Bree's chin with one finger. Bree backed away.

The girl followed, saying, "Look at me!"

Bree lifted her chin, but the girl's finger stayed beneath it. Bree had all she could do to keep herself from opening her mouth and snapping her teeth around the finger. If she had her way, the girl would be hollering with pain.

Instead, Bree opened her eyes wide. Without blinking, she stared at the girl with her meanest look. The girl stared back.

Mikkel laughed. "You've met your match, Gna. You can't beat her down."

"No?" Gna turned on him, and the coldness in her eyes became a fire in her face. "You think I can't. I've never known a person who hasn't learned to bow before me."

Bow? Bree asked herself, then realized she had spoken aloud.

Gna whirled on her. "So you know my language too. You will do more than bow. You will grovel in the dust of the earth before I am through with you. You will be my slave!"

Bree straightened, threw back her shoulders, and lifted her head. With the same movement, she turned slightly from looking at Gna to Mikkel. No words passed between Bree and Mikkel, but in that moment Bree knew he remembered.

"No, she won't," Mikkel said.

Gna stared at him. Even Bree felt surprised at the strength in his voice, but it was Gna who spoke. "You think not?"

A flush of embarrassment crept into Mikkel's neck, then into his face. But when he met Gna's gaze, there was no backing down. "She will not be your slave. She will be my mother's slave."

Gna laughed. The hard, cold sound of it sent a shiver down Bree's spine. Then to her surprise she forgot

everything else. The bleating of sheep and bawling of cattle drowned out the voices of families on the beach.

As Bree swung around, she saw a wide, flat-bottomed boat that looked like a raft. The minute it came to rest on shore, the animals started over the low sides. A large billy goat led the rest. The billy headed straight for Gna.

“Gna!” Mikkel called in warning.

Whirling around, the girl saw her danger. Fingers spread wide, she held out her hands to stop him. His eyes focused on her, the goat kept coming. When Gna side-stepped to the right, he moved with her. When she leaped to the left, he followed.

“Help!” Gna cried, but to Bree’s surprise, Mikkel stood as still as a rock.

Gna whirled on him. “Get that goat!” she commanded. In the moment she turned her back, the billy lowered his head and ran straight for Gna’s behind. With one good butt, he sent her sprawling.

Trying to swallow her laughter, Bree choked. Instead, a giggle slipped out. Mikkel slapped his leg, echoing her glee. When Gna looked their way, both of them grew instantly quiet.

“Uh-oh,” Mikkel said softly. “We’ve done it now.”

“Is she the girl you’re going to marry?” Bree whispered, suddenly curious.

When Mikkel didn’t answer, Bree hurried forward,

offering her hand to Gna. "Can I help you up?" she said, her voice as sweet as honey in the comb.

But Gna shoved Bree's arm aside. Slowly, gracefully, Gna rose from the shore, brushed off her skirt, and whirled on Bree.

"I will *never* forget that!" Gna's eyes sparked her anger. "You are my enemy from this day forward. You will be my enemy forever!"

"Ah, Gna," Mikkel said. "Don't take yourself so seriously."

"Seriously? You aren't the one knocked to the ground by this—this—" Gna had no words for him. "This outlaw goat, that's what he is!"

As Gna stared after him, Bree's gaze followed hers. A short distance away, the billy goat had stopped. Looking at Gna, the goat seemed to roll his eyes. Then with all the dignity he could bring to the occasion, he started munching grass.

"Yes, he's an outlaw goat, all right," Mikkel answered in his most solemn voice. "I can see how dangerous he is."

As the billy set off again, the other goats followed. Zigzagging their way between the people on shore, they hurried toward green pasture near the longhouse.

"Where did they come from?" Bree asked.

"The out-farm—the summer pasture." Mikkel pointed across the fjord to where they had loaded the animals. "They've had good green grass all summer, but at the end

of September we bring them down. If there was snow or ice on the mountain, we wouldn't be able to get them home."

Mikkel pointed to the steep side of a mountain farther along the fjord. "See that slanted line? There's a path for the animals to go up. That's where they come down when summer is over."

As Mikkel talked, sheep followed the goats. Then a cow, swinging her head from side to side, followed the sheep, still bawling her complaint. Bree looked after the cow and the billy now far up in the pasture. Remembering Gna, Bree giggled.

Gna whirled around. With one glimpse into her eyes, Bree knew. No doubt about it. Gna was her enemy.

Bree gritted her teeth. All her life people had treated her nicely. She didn't know how to handle someone like Gna. *But I'm going to learn. Somehow I'll get along with her. Maybe we'll even become friends.*

Then Bree remembered. Being a slave would no doubt set her apart from Gna.

With his sea chest on his shoulder, Mikkel started up the slope toward the longhouse and farm buildings. When he turned to speak to Bree, she sensed the change in him.

"Come," he said, his voice impatient now.

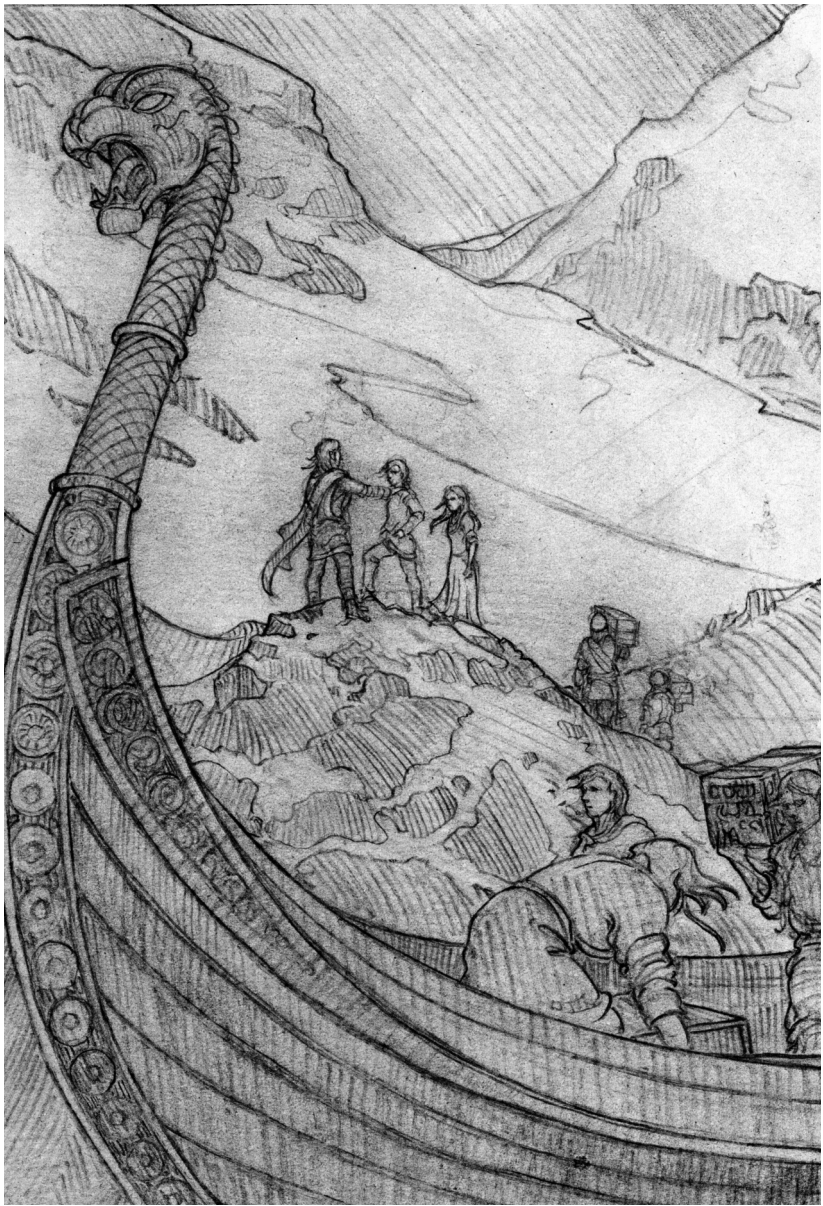
So, am I supposed to walk behind you? Bree almost flung out the words. The idea made her angry. More than once

Mikkel had told her his father was the mighty chieftain of the Aurland Fjord. More than once, Bree had wanted to spit back, “And I am a chieftain’s daughter!” So far she had managed to hold her tongue.

Now she wondered about it. If her brother Devin managed to raise ransom money, what would happen?

Bree’s thoughts scurried on. *If these terrible Vikings know I’m a chieftain’s daughter, will they raise the price of letting me go? Will they demand so much that Dev can’t pay what they ask?*

Ahead of Bree, Mikkel suddenly stopped.





Mikkel swept his windblown blond hair out of his blue eyes. Turning, he looked back to the waters of the fjord. Strong and beautiful with sleek sides, his longship rested on the shore. As always, Mikkel's heart leaped with pride whenever he gazed upon his ship.

My Sea Bird. Always Mikkel had called it his. In his thinking, at least, it belonged to him. The Viking ship had served him well.

Tall for his age and with skin bronzed by the sun and wind, Mikkel felt like what he was—the master of a ship and leader of a crew of men. Soon after he turned fourteen, his father had put him in charge of this merchant ship that sailed from the Aurland Fjord to Ireland.

In Dublin, Mikkel had traded both skins and furs. Then he raided the Irish countryside, stealing precious gems and other treasures. Most valuable of all were the 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 Mikkel wouldn't worry about that. He was home. Gone were the dangerous moments on the open sea. Here he was, safe at last. He had even brought home valuable Irish prisoners. Soon he must face his father and some very big questions.

My Sea Bird? Deep inside where he didn't want to look, Mikkel wondered about it. Since his raid on the Irish monastery, he had asked himself what his father would do when he found out.

Turning to Bree, Mikkel saw the troubled look in her eyes. "Where do I go?" she asked.

"I'll show you." Along the shore were the other prisoners who had become slaves during Mikkel's raid on the monastery. *No matter!* he told himself. *They're only Irish. Plenty of other Vikings do what I did.*

Mikkel let a warm feeling of satisfaction fill his insides. This, the first voyage he led, had been successful in every way. He was coming home with his sea chest filled with treasure. Ignoring the shadow in Bree's eyes, Mikkel grinned just thinking about it.

But Bree did not smile back. Bowing her head, she stared at the ground.

She'll get over it, Mikkel told himself. Before long, she'll like it here. She won't mind being a slave.

Soon all the people in the mountains and valleys around the Aurland Fjord would know how well he had done on his first voyage. From this moment on, his fame would grow. In the great halls of the north his name would pass from one storyteller to the next. All the world would hear of Mikkel, son of Sigurd, mighty chieftain of Aurland!

But now Mikkel wondered where his father was. Busy, no doubt, seeing to the people under his care. Sigurd took his responsibilities as chieftain seriously.

Mikkel's chest swelled with the pride he always felt when he thought of his father. Then something else rushed in—a fear that Mikkel couldn't push aside as easily as the Irish prisoners. Deep in his heart Mikkel held a bigger secret, one he must keep from his father, no matter what the cost.

A moment later Mikkel saw him coming. With a strong step and long stride, Sigurd hurried from the river that emptied into the Aurland Fjord. On land owned by his family for generations, Mikkel set down his sea chest and faced him.

With gray-white hair and mustache and beard trimmed close to his face, Sigurd stood tall and straight. His powerfully built hands and shoulders still made Mikkel feel small, but he had learned to watch for the expression on his father's face.

Sigurd looked at him with gladness of heart.

Mikkel bowed his head in respect. "Father," he said.

Sigurd's smile was filled with the warmth Mikkel sought. "You are late," his father answered. "Did you have trouble?"

"A storm in the North Sea." When Mikkel told him about it, his father's eyes turned dark with concern. Three years before, Mikkel's older brother had been lost at sea.

Now Sigurd's smile showed his relief. Reaching out, he clapped Mikkel's shoulder. "It's good to have you home—to see you safe."

Then Sigurd glanced toward the fjord where prisoners still waited near the ship. "Who are these people who came in with you?"

"I have brought you slaves, Father."

Suddenly Sigurd's face held the stern look that Mikkel dreaded. "You have brought us people who need to eat, and winter will soon be upon us."

"I have brought you valuable workers."

"You have brought people who should be home with their families. I asked you to be a merchant. I supplied you with a ship, with men, and with goods to trade. Was it not enough?"

Mikkel's chin lifted. "From one raid I am a wealthy fourteen-year-old."

"But are you an honest fourteen-year-old?"

Deep inside, Mikkel felt the flush of anger move

from his chest up into his face. Again he bowed his head, but this time he wanted to hide his resentment.

As Sigurd turned, his gaze rested on Bree. "And who is this?"

Mikkel shrugged, as though it wasn't important. "A slave. An Irish lass gathered up from the countryside when my men raided a monastery."

Sigurd looked long and hard at Mikkel. "She is under my protection."

Mikkel lifted his head. "She is under my protection also. Bree rescued me from drowning and saved my life. I promised to watch out for her."

"See that you do," answered Sigurd.

When he extended his hand, Mikkel looked his father straight in the eye and shook on it.

"I need to welcome the others," Sigurd said. "We'll talk more at home."

As he watched Sigurd head down the slope, Mikkel thought again of the secret he must hide from his father. *If he finds out—*

Mikkel pushed away the thought. *He won't. My secret is safe. No one else knows. No one but me and one other person. And that person is far beyond the Irish Sea.*

Lifting his head, Mikkel grinned. *I'll get away with it. I'm sure of that.*

Now Mikkel wanted to set down his sea chest where

it would be safe. He'd find a place where he could look upon his treasure with no other eyes to watch.

"Pay no attention to my father," Mikkell told Bree as they watched Sigurd hurry toward the longship. "My father is a wise and just man. But no matter what he says, you're still a slave."

This time Mikkell watched Bree's face. A look as stiff as dried mud had slipped over her eyes and mouth. Mikkell knew what that meant. Sometimes Bree's mask slipped, and Mikkell saw how angry she felt. Other times she hid her feelings so he wouldn't know she was planning something. When Bree planned something, it was almost always escape.

Coming from the ship, Bree had walked behind him as a slave should. Yet even when she should feel like a slave, Bree somehow made him feel she was winning.

"You know," Mikkell warned, "if you try to run away, it's a very long trip across the mountains."

Bree waited, not looking at him.

"Any small boat you steal will not help you enough when the winter winds come."

Bree turned and looked back to the fjord, as though considering the idea.

"And there's no food or shelter along the way."

Suddenly Bree laughed. Even Mikkell saw the joke of it. Bree had already shown her ability to find her own food and shelter on a mountainside. And now when she

smiled, it was as though the sun came out from behind the clouds.

Mikkel was almost fooled, but not quite. That smile of hers usually meant he had lost on every count.

Whatever she's planning, it's something big.