

THE SONGBIRD

CARRIE COTTEN

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CARRIE COTTEN
Gripping Christian Fiction

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Edited by Jennifer Q. Hunt and Sarah Stasik

Formatted by B. R. Goodwin

Paperback ISBN: 9798248020607

Hardcover ISBN: 9798248020850

ASIN: BoG5155LX1

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PRAISE FOR THE SONGBIRD

The Songbird is another masterful story from Carrie Cotten! Her books always stir the soul, provoke deep thoughts, and point the reader toward Christ, but this one does that perhaps even better than all the rest. It's a timely story that will inspire you to be bold in your faith no matter the cost! Oh, and as if that wasn't enough reason to read this book... the hero is a pirate.

If you want the perfect balance between powerful Christian storytelling and swoon-worthy romance, this is it!

~ Ashton E. Dorow, author of the "Royals of Acuniel" and "Crown of Aerilon" series

Cotten's grand storytelling sweeps the reader into a world of alliance, betrayal and adventure as her characters race to rescue the innocent and push back the darkness with the eternal light of truth. A beautiful picture of redemption in which the enslaved learn what it means to be free indeed. A story (and series) not to be missed.

~ Kelly Ferguson, Book Reviewer and Podcaster

To all those who struggle to release your past and embrace the freedom of forgiveness. I see you. God sees you. Open your hands, beloved, and let Him take it.

And when you have no words, keep singing.

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” John 15:13

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks always and foremost to God. To the Creator of all that is, was, and evermore will be. Thank you Jesus for the beauty of words, to communicate stories, tell tales, sing songs, and share both the joys and sorrows of all that leads us ever closer to you.

Thanks to Christine! Without her endless knowledge and willingness to answer my crazy questions, none of this series would make any sense at all. She's the true Viking princess.

To Jennifer Q. Hunt - the developmental editor of the ages. You know I can't do anything without you. From beginning ideas, to outlining, to first (and sometimes second and third) draft, your expertise guides my projects from dumpster fire to gleaming jewels.

To Sarah Stasik - who believes in each story probably more than I do. Girl, you are queen of the commas and captain of cutting those extraneous words. You keep me straight when I wander and push every story right over the top.

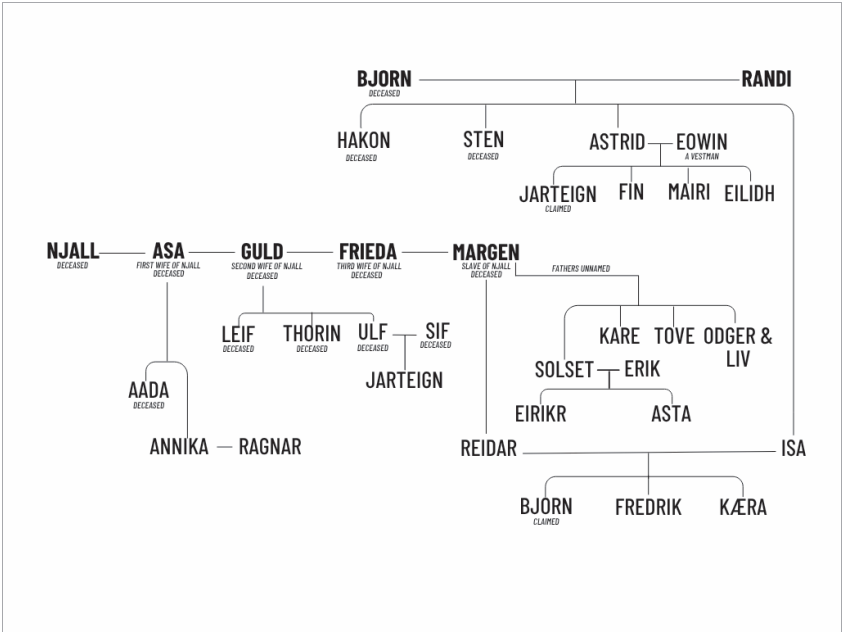
To my ballers! You are the wind beneath my wings. The joy to every morning. Your support and prayers and accountability have made everything I do next level.

To my ARC team. Never has an author had such an amazing group of women standing stalwart and strong behind her like I have with this group. You are up for anything, quick to jump in when anything is needed and so encouraging. Every single one of you is a light in the darkness. You are essential. Please don't ever leave me.

To my family. Your sacrifice does not go unnoticed. You are willing to carry on when I'm in the depths of drafting and the despair

of editing. Thank you for letting me live this crazy life and cheering me on all along the way.

FAMILY TREE



PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Tove (Tōv-uh)

Isa (Ee-suh)

Reidar (Rye-dar)

Liv- (Leev)

Ødger - (Eudj-ahrr)

Kåre- (Kaw-ri)

Dæg- (Dī-eeg)

Gerritt - (Gair-it)

Sanne - (Sahn-ay)

Eno - (Ee-nō)

Svlk (Svilk)

Vikkja (Vik-juh)

Eowin - (Ay·ōh·win)

Cyrene -(Sih-reen)

Freydis - (Frray-dees)

Sigurd - (See-gurrd)

Féhirðir - (Fay-hirr-thir)

Bölvarr - (Bull-wahrr)

Horsa - (Horr-suh)

Járnheimr - (Yarrn-hī-murr)

Marwier- (Marr-veerr)

PROLOGUE

Tove

826 AD

Harsh hands yanked her up by the hair and out of an almost perfect dream. Echoes of laughter and song had filled Tove's mind, chased by flashes of familiar faces. She'd dreamed of a home—a small hut with cracks in the walls and a door that didn't close all the way. But it was packed with love. With family. A safe place where she belonged and was welcome.

The dream had shifted to a view through older eyes. She carried a babe on her hip. A golden-haired girl ran toward something in the distance, reaching for a man coming toward them. The girl wasn't afraid of him, and neither was Tove. Upon seeing him, her heart sped with a soul-deep longing. He was coming into focus when she was torn away by the pain in her scalp.

Fully awake in her nightmarish reality, Tove clawed at the only

family she had left. Her fingers barely raked along her brother's tattered sleeve before she was dragged away.

A yelp slipped past her lips when another hard jerk nearly ripped her hair from its roots. She grasped at the violent hands, holding onto meaty wrists, trying to ease the pain. Kåre's hazel eyes flew open, his wild brown curls going in all directions as he sat up.

Tove was not unused to such violence, but it was normally reserved for daylight hours. The darkness was her friend, hiding her from the increasingly lingering eyes of the farmer who owned her and Kåre and quieting the cruel words of his wife.

It was that wife who hissed in her ear as she hauled Tove across the dirt floor of the stable. "You have outstayed your usefulness, girl."

No. She'd been quiet. She'd been good.

A worried Kåre roused from where he'd been sleeping next to her on a threadbare blanket, frantically pulling on his worn boots when he met Tove's terrified eyes. He lurched for her, but she was torn from his grasp.

Tove's coarse linen shift snagged on a jagged tooth of the farmer's harrow, its iron spikes still crusted with dirt from the last tilling.

"It will be all right," she told her brother in their secret language, the one they'd developed over endless lonely nights locked in this very stable. Floundering to free the fabric of her dress from the stubborn tool built to rip through earth, she whispered, "Do not cause trouble."

A loud rip cut through the night. The farmer's wife released her grip on Tove's hair long enough to clamp pudgy fingers around her arm. Tove struggled to cover her now bare shoulder with the shredded pieces of her shift.

"Quit that gibberish." The wild-haired woman's rough nails dug into Tove's skin before the back of her other hand came across Tove's cheek and sent stars exploding through her vision.

Whatever she had done to anger the woman would end in a beating, hateful words, and most likely no food for a day or two, but she would survive. She always had.

Kåre never tried to understand, to see if any glimpse of humanity

remained in these people who owned them, but Tove did. The farmer and his wife were cruel, but they had lost all of their sons to sickness—not even a glorious death in battle—and loss made hearts hard. Tove and Kåre had survived that same sickness, an injustice in the eyes of their owners. Especially the wife. They had grown increasingly bitter and violent since then, but Tove knew what to expect. She could trust them to do what they'd always done, leaving her be when the rage and hurt were sated. Which was why she talked Kåre out of trying to escape every time he started to make plans. Their mother, Margen, had escaped slavery to find death instead of freedom.

For Kåre's sake, she would remain silent through it all. If she cried, he would suffer too. It was best if only one of them were punished at a time. They came to this farm when they were barely more than babes, and after a few winters, they made two agreements. The first was to only refer to their captors as Farmer and Wife, just as their owners only called them Girl and Boy. The second: one of them always had to be well enough to take care of the other.

Now that Kåre was fifteen, his lanky body starting to fill out with muscle earned through grueling labor, it was getting harder for her to drag him back to the stable if he earned the ire of their owners. Though she was only one year younger, her own arms toned and strong from work, he was much larger.

Finally getting her feet underneath her, Tove scrambled after Wife, trying to avoid the slice of the woman's nails through her exposed skin. Her scalp screamed, and her cheek burned. Wife tightened her grip, thinking Tove was attempting escape, sending spears of fire up her arm.

"Where are you taking her?" Kåre called, almost reaching them as Tove was thrown outside through the open stable door.

She landed in a heap on the hard ground, and sharp stones pierced her palms. Wife blocked the doorway, and though Kåre matched her in height, his shoulders just as broad, he stopped. Watching Kåre's pain increase when she tried to intervene on his behalf in other situations was worse than receiving the beating

herself. She knew this was why he didn't plow past Wife as easily as he could have now.

"Your sister will finally earn back the coin I have wasted on her all these winters," Wife spat at Kåre's feet, sending him back a step.

He looked up, horrified eyes meeting Tove's as she brushed back the single section of white-blond hair so different from the rest of her brown locks. He wore the same pleading look from days before, when he presented a new scheme to flee.

I do not like the look in Farmer's eyes when he watches you, Tove.

But an escaped slave was a dead slave, so she'd resisted.

"No—" His cry was cut off when Wife slammed the stable door in his face, barring it first with her rotund figure and then with a nearby plank that she wedged against the ground and the wood when the door shuddered from the force of Kåre's body.

More hands descended upon Tove, further tearing her already worn dress as they yanked her to her feet. Uncontrollable tremors overtook her body when she was turned to face Farmer, who ran his thick, calloused fingers along the frayed rip in her shift. His hungry grin, stretched wide over yellowed teeth, turned her stomach.

"What is this?" he asked with delight, like she was a lucky bit of coin he'd found.

"Take her inside," Wife barked, still pressed against the shaking stable door. Kåre's frenzied shouts seeped through the cracks along with the thunderous sounds of his fists against the wood. Wife reached for another plank, working to better secure the door. "There are men coming to bid on her."

Farmer shot a hateful look at his wife before sliding a wicked gaze back to Tove. "Very well, my dear wife."

Bid? No. No, no, no. She knew what that meant. Every trip to the trading market forced her to witness countless auctions, and she always thanked whatever gods would listen that she was spared that fate. Bruises, wrenched arms, and curses were bearable, as long as she was with Kåre and her work was on the farm and not in some hideous man's bed.

Tove shook with fear, every muscle locked and nerve raw. Kåre

was right. They should have fled. Should have risked punishment and the terrors of the wilderness, for whatever awaited her now would be worse than a beating. Bad enough for Kåre to do something he'd never done before—rebel.

Farmer had always frightened her; his leering looks and wandering hands kept her hovering closer than she wanted to the woman who hated her. But the older Tove became, the more lingering his looks, the more often he cornered her in the stable. Though he always threatened to hurt Kåre should she breathe a word of his advances, Tove knew Wife suspected. She knew what those looks from Farmer meant, what the monster was planning. She knew why Wife would choose now to send her away.

“Kåre!” The scream she had kept back for almost ten winters scratched her throat as it cut through the darkness lingering before dawn. “Kåre!”

Her brother's efforts to escape the stable intensified, Wife having to reach for another discarded plank to keep him contained. For the first time, Tove also fought. Her fingers pulled at the farmer's firm grip, heels digging into the dirt. A hand came crashing across her face with such force, darkness edged her vision and her knees buckled. Before she could crumple to the ground, she was hefted over Farmer's bony shoulder and carried toward the longhouse.

Once inside, he unceremoniously tossed her onto the packed earth floor, and she bit back a cry over the pain when she landed hard on her hip.

“I am certain my wife wants you looking your best to get the most coin.” He grinned as he approached, and Tove countered his steps, scrambling backward until her back met a solid wooden beam. “Let us get you changed, shall we?”

His starving gaze crawled over her, as if choosing which part to devour first.

“No, please,” she whimpered, abandoning every promise she'd made to be good. To be quiet. “Let me go back to Kåre. I will not make trouble. I promise.”

“I would keep you, little dove—”

“Husband!”

With a growl, Farmer turned, facing his red-faced wife who filled the doorway. Her once thick yellow hair, now thin and white at the roots, stuck out in all directions. Her dress was disheveled and her face streaked with dirt.

“The boy is going wild. I blocked the door, but you need to get him under control before he tears down the barn.” She jerked her head, motioning toward the stable where Tove could still hear Kåre’s shouts. “Nail it shut if you must.”

Farmer whipped his head back to Tove, leaving her with a grimaced smirk before obeying his wife.

“I see you have grown some wits about you,” Wife snapped as she came to stand over Tove with her hands on her wide hips. Tove cowered against the beam, her knees pulled tight to her chest, when Wife bent, bringing her round face near Tove’s. “Fight me again, and it will be your brother we trade. He will be ruined in such ways that he will not remember his own name.”

Wife’s face blurred against the tears filling her eyes, and Tove squeezed her arms around her legs tighter, fighting the tremble that threatened to shatter her bones.

Wife whipped a scrap of fabric and a bone comb at Tove. “Dry your worthless tears, put that on, and comb your ratty hair.”

Half an hour later, Tove stood outside the longhouse in a thin shift, a line of men staring with such stripping gazes she felt as if she wore nothing at all. The sun was still ascending, and her skin was prickled by gooseflesh against the cold of morning.

After Farmer returned from the stable, Kåre’s shouts quieted. But there was still a faint thump coming from behind the door Farmer had sealed with two planks nailed to the walls on either side.

“I am here, Tove.” She heard Kåre’s weak voice slip under the gap between the ground and the door. “I am here with you.”

As Wife bargained with the men, shaking her head in frustration at whatever offers they made, Tove kept her eyes on the stable. Could she race across the grass, pull free the planks, and escape with Kåre before they were caught?

No. Still, she didn't tear her eyes away, hoping against hope for one last glimpse of her brother. For the chance to tell him to be strong, to not give up. To live.

The loss of that perfect dream of a family, of a place where they both belonged, was all right as long as her brother survived. As long as he found it someday.

Tove's gaze was torn away when Wife roughly gripped her chin, forcing her lips open to show off her straight, white teeth. Then she took another handful of Tove's long brown hair and jerked her head to the side as she argued about its shine.

When a man finally gave a number that made Wife smile, Tove's body shook so violently she could barely stand. A distant thunder of hoofbeats echoed across the surrounding hills as the limping, gray-haired man who'd won the bid dropped his sack of coin into Wife's palm.

Tove closed her eyes, lifting a low-hummed song to the heavens, begging whatever ears might hear that Kåre would survive. She couldn't determine if the growing thuds were horses or her own heart until shouting began.

When Tove's eyes flew open, a woman clad in leather fighting armor stood before her. Warm brown eyes and a gentle smile decorated her face, and Tove broke away from her gaze to scan the place where those wicked men had stood. Their battered bodies rolled on the ground, groaning in pain and cringing away from the warriors who must have arrived with this woman. Farmer stood silent and wide-eyed while Wife screeched her protests from the hold of more warriors.

The warrior woman whipped her head around and raised her sword until it grazed Wife's throat, sufficiently quieting her in an instant.

"Are you called Tove?" the woman asked, turning her eyes back to Tove without lowering her sword from Wife.

Without thinking, Tove offered an automatic nod. The creak of nails captured her attention. A few of the warriors had abandoned the bidding men to remove the planks barring the stable door. When

it swung open, Tove cried out as Kåre's body slumped through the opening, his head slowly lifting until their eyes met.

A warm hand came to rest on her shoulder as the woman moved her aside to drop a large purse on the ground in front of Farmer and Wife.

"I am Randi Helgidóttir, Shieldmaiden of Völfsby," she said to Tove. "And I have come to take you home."

TOVE

829 AD

Tove fingered the delicate embroidery of the new dress she would wear to her handfasting ceremony. It was soft gray, like the bird she was named for, while the shift underneath was the blue-green of the sea on a summer morning. Her oldest brother's wife stood behind her, adding the final beaded embellishments to the braid she had plaited down Tove's back.

"Are you nervous?" Isa asked, clasping Tove's shoulders and bending so both their faces were visible in the small mirror. Isa's moon-white braid fell over her shoulder, and her crystal-blue eyes met Tove's gray ones in the polished glass. "After everything you have been through, no one would blame you for not wishing this for your life. Trust me, I understand."

Isa was the only one who could truly understand. While Tove had been groped and nearly sold into a future of torment, Isa had endured a full year in the hands of a violent and depraved man.

Isa tilted her head until it rested against Tove's, reminding her

that she had survived. They'd both survived. Both were reunited with family, safe and happy. The farmer would never touch her again. Isa's tormentor, Torsten, was dead, and Isa had her son, Bjorn, as the bright beauty that came from such darkness.

Tove hummed as she thought about her answer, her eyes lingering on the differences between Isa's face and hers. Tove's sun-touched complexion and brown hair contrasted sharply with Isa's colorless strands and ivory tone. Isa's frame was petite and slender compared to Tove's broader shoulders, which bore evidence of many years of labor, but she hoped one day to carry the same quiet strength as her sister-in-law.

"I think..." she pressed her palm to her stomach. Her belly had been filled with butterflies all day, each wingbeat a note in a wild new melody. She'd had little interaction with the man she would handfast today, but Isa's mother, the Shieldmaiden, had arranged the union, and she trusted Randi with her life. With her future.

Without Randi Helgidóttir, she would have had no future. She wouldn't have found the siblings she and Kåre thought they'd lost long ago—their older brother, Reidar, older sister, Sólset, and the younger twins, Liv and Ødger. The family that had filled that tiny shack from her dreams.

Though she had no mother or father to stand for her, she'd been claimed by the Shieldmaiden and her new community, sealed forever as Tove Volsbydóttir. This union would take her to a settlement several weeks' journey from Volsby, but she still had a home. Kin. A place she finally belonged. And now she gained the possibility of growing that family with her new husband, of her dream coming true. All because of the Shieldmaiden to whom she would be forever grateful.

"I think that I am excited?"

Isa laughed, a pure bell-like sound. "You think?"

"I have too many feelings to name just one." Tove turned on her stool, trying to avoid staring at the tiny swell Isa was hiding under her loose overdress.

This would be Isa's third babe, though she and Reidar hadn't

announced it yet. As if all of Völsby didn't already know just by Reidar's cocky smirk and how he watched Isa as if he were a blind man who had recently been granted sight. Even without her brother's obvious tells, Tove spent enough time with Isa to notice the exhaustion in her eyes and the way her hands constantly fluttered over her belly. Isa and Reidar had been through so much, such heartbreak. She was happy they'd found peace and each other. It bolstered Tove's hope for her own future.

Isa ran her delicate finger across the streak of white that cut through Tove's brown hair. It had been there since her birth, and Reidar said it reminded him of a dove's belly. It was why he'd named her Tove.

She asked her brother once why he had named her and not their mother, but at his sorrowful expression, she'd quickly changed the subject. Margen had lived a hard life; she did the best she knew how, ending up with six children from five different fathers. Her mother would have given her the most meaningful and loveliest of names had she been able.

Tove inhaled deeply, reminding herself this was the day of her handfasting—not a day to let sadness over the past overtake her hope for the future.

Isa's sweet expression turned serious as she cupped Tove's cheeks and lifted her face so their eyes met. "But you are not afraid of Dæg, are you? I know you spent a good portion of your life enslaved and in fear. I will not stand for you to endure one more day of that. I will go to my móðir right now and—"

"No." Tove covered Isa's hands with her own, heat warming her cheeks as she thought of the man who would be waiting for her in the clearing. At seventeen winters, she still sometimes thought of herself as a girl, though she was well past the age most handfasted. She was thankful Dæg was but two winters older. Flashes of those auctions she'd witnessed where young women were given to much older men sent a shudder through her body.

"He is strong, but he is also kind and gentle. And the way he looks at me—" She couldn't help the sigh that escaped her lips. When

Dæg's hazel eyes, the same color as Kåre's, fell over her, it was nothing like Farmer's wicked leering. It made her heart warm, not frozen. "I believe we will love each other."

Isa wrapped her arms around Tove's shoulders. "I am so happy for you, my sister. I prayed for a man who would care for your tender heart."

When Isa moved to gather a deep blue, fur-lined cloak, Tove turned on the short wooden stool. She'd been free from slavery a few winters, but it was still strange for her to enjoy simple things like warm clothes, a full belly, and a safe place to sleep. Sometimes she heard Wife's taunting voice or caught herself lowering her head to stare at the floor whenever someone spoke to her, but when it was Isa talking, she would patiently lift Tove's chin, meeting her eyes with such compassion. Her sister-in-law quickly became the one she felt most comfortable confiding in.

She'd always shared her heart with Kåre. But he was a boy—a man now—and was growing into his own new life. With his complete aversion to anything to do with love, there were certain things he couldn't understand. Besides, Kåre was still uncertain of the new faith Tove had embraced freely and fully. "I have prayed, too, for my new family to hear and accept The Christ."

"Part of the agreement between our clans is that they allow a truth-speaker to reside in Járnheimr and for anyone willing to hear his teachings." Isa paused the brushing of her hand along the soft fabric of the cloak. "Do you have cause to worry they will not keep to that agreement?"

"No. I am encouraged, considering their goði is the faðir of the Chieftain's own wife. I am certain that was a difficult compromise for their priest to accept. Dæg will be Chieftain one day soon, and he has already said he wants to worship The Christ. I know your móðir would not have considered the arrangement otherwise. He will be a great influence over his people." Tove's fingers found each other in her lap, twisting together. "But I know that Dæg has many questions, and it will be hard for him to walk away from his old gods."

With a soft smile, Isa draped the cloak over Tove's shoulders,

securing it with an elaborate silver brooch at her neck. Even though it was well into spring, the evenings remained cool, and the soft fur of the cloak bathed her in a comforting embrace.

“Have patience, Tove. This Christ is new to many, but He has a way of showing Himself to be the only One worthy of true worship. Soon Dæg will see this, and that will make his love for you grow even more. His people will be your people too. You can also be a great influence.”

“The Shieldmaiden told me, ‘Every mighty wind began with a whisper of a breeze, and every legendary ballad with a single note.’”

Isa laughed softly. “That sounds like something she would say. Móðir can be quite poetic sometimes. But she is right; small steps can take you long distances. Plus, Dæg now has you to guide him. Your brother did not believe when we were first handfasted, but he came to see the truth.”

“You mean when he claimed you in front of the entire village without your permission?”

Isa laughed, her hands drifting mindlessly to her stomach again. “Yes, the rogue did not think that through very well. He had his reasons, though.”

“Yet you said yes when he did ask.”

“I did,” Isa sighed. “I guess he won my heart as The Christ won his.”

Tove laid her hand over Isa’s, smiling at her sister-in-law in the mirror. “Thank you, Isa.”

Isa stood, quickly wiping the back of her hand across her cheek and drawing a deep breath as Reidar peeked into the room. His gaze went first to his wife, who scoffed and waved him off when he worried over the tears she tried to hide.

Both Tove’s and Dæg’s clans were gathered down the hill from the great hall, which was filled with guests preparing for the feast that would follow. Since Isa’s mother was the Shieldmaiden, Isa, Reidar, and most of his siblings lived in the rooms at the end of the hall along with Randi Helgidóttir’s warband.

Only Sølset and Reidar's half-sister, Annika, lived with their husbands in other settlements.

Tove swallowed the momentary wave of grief when she thought of her oldest sister. Sølset would have come, but she was weeks from giving birth to her second child, and her Chieftain husband, Erik, wouldn't hear of it. Tove agreed. Sølset had struggled so much with the birth of their first babe, they feared she would experience the same this time.

"You look lovely, sister." Reidar stepped fully into the room, flanked by Kåre and their youngest brother, Ødger, who had to duck to clear the doorway.

Reidar lifted Tove's hands, raising her arms to view her dress. "Dæg does not deserve someone as sweet and kind as you."

Tove felt the warmth of a blush on her cheeks. She wasn't used to being the center of attention and preferred to remain in the shadows. Bad things had always happened when she was noticed.

Her gaze darted to Kåre, and with the subtle shake of his head, like in the days when it was just the two of them on the farm, he reminded her. *That was then. It is different now.* Even with his encouragement, she still found comfort in staring at her shoes.

When Reidar's knuckle nudged her chin up, his dark brown eyes scoured her face. His expression lost all sense of levity.

"What is wrong?" he asked, a sharp edge to his tone.

Ødger growled and started for the door, withdrawing one of the many blades he always wore. At only fifteen winters, he was already the size of an oak—and as quiet.

"No, Ødg. Stop. Do not be such a beast," Tove laughed, shaking her head. She grabbed Ødger's tunic and pulled him back into the room—only able to because he allowed it. "I am simply nervous about being in front of all those people."

"I will speak to the Shieldmaiden. The handfasting is off." Kåre grumbled, and Ødger nodded, driving the fist of one hand into the palm of his other.

"Oh, you men," Isa scoffed. "So overprotective. Let Tove have her day. No fighting." She aimed a finger at Reidar, making him blink

with feigned innocence. “Especially you, Guardian. No threatening to remove the hands of any guests.”

“I swear it, Valkyrie.” Sufficiently chastised, Reidar bowed dramatically, a hand held over his heart. Isa had shared how she’d melted at the affectionate name Reidar gave her when he was hired by the Shieldmaiden to be her guard years ago. “As long as those hands stay far away from my wife and sisters.”

Isa rolled her eyes but playfully swatted his shoulder. “Did you not train us yourself? Do you now doubt our ability to defend ourselves? Should we find a new teacher?”

“Such a wise Valkyrie.” Reidar laughed, dodging another of Isa’s swipes. He grabbed Tove by the shoulders, using her as a shield against his wife as he called, “I surrender.”

“Best you should.” Isa turned her attention to Kåre, ignoring his complaints as she straightened his tunic. She brushed her fingers through his wild curls, but was unsuccessful in taming them. She took one look at Ødg, who growled again, and sighed with resignation. There was no domesticating that beast.

Reidar turned Tove to face him, narrowed his eyes, and cocked his head as he focused his gaze on hers. “You are certain?”

She had been until everyone started asking her if she was.

“Is there something you all know that I do not?” she asked nervously. Her heart raced, fearing her first impressions of Dæg had been wrong.

“No.” Reidar blinked and shook his head. Locks of dark hair fell across his forehead. “No, of course not, Tove. It is just that we love you and want to make sure you are happy. I only just got you all back. It is my duty as the oldest to worry.”

When Isa came to her side and slipped her hand into Tove’s, she felt steadier facing the protective wall of her brothers. A long breath escaped her, and relief spread through her limbs, freeing her muscles from their tight state. She stepped toward Reidar, the brother she’d lost for too many winters, and softly kissed his cheek.

This union was a chance for the gospel of The Christ to reach lost hearts and to make Volksby stronger and safer for her family. Reidar

and Isa's babes would never face the heartache she and her siblings had endured, so she spoke with confidence when she answered, "Yes, I am certain."

Reidar nodded, kissed Isa's forehead, and slipped out of the door with a murmur that he would be right back.

"Let us finish getting you ready." Isa turned Tove back toward the mirror and helped her secure a beaded belt adorned with a small purse at her waist. It would be filled with gifts and coin at the feast.

Kåre and Ødger stood guard at the door, and when Tove fussed at their hovering, Isa shushed her with a soft pat on her shoulder. "I lost my brothers before I was born and rarely see my sister. Be thankful you have such an army at your side, Tove."

Tove swallowed past the lump in her throat, and her eyes sought Kåre's again. They'd been separated from their family for so long, but everyone had survived. She knew what a miracle that was. Reidar had three more siblings who shared the same father, but he lost two before he knew they existed: a brother to battle, and a sister to plague.

"You are right." She covered Isa's hand with her own. "I am so grateful God brought us all back together."

It truly was nothing less than a miracle. After their mother had been murdered, all but Reidar had been sold into slavery. Liv and Ødg were just babies and had been rescued quickly, and Sølset not long after them. Tove and Kåre were the last, but they were free now thanks to Randi Helgidóttir.

"Liv will be here any moment." Isa's whisper brought Tove back to the present and reignited her nerves. When Tove groaned, Isa leaned in and whispered in Tove's ear. "Just think, if they are staring at a giant bundle of flowers, they will not be staring at you."

"Oh!" Tove perked at the thought. "That is true."

Ødger's twin, who now looked very little like him save for the golden color of their hair, had insisted on decorating the entire hall with bouquets of blooms and tall grasses and demanded Tove carry in an arrangement of her own.

Isa's sudden gasp had Tove jumping and her brothers drawing

their blades. Liv stood behind Kåre and Ødger, a brilliant bundle of flowers in her hand. None of them had heard the door open.

Ødger slapped his hand over his heart and rolled his eyes to the roof, shocking everyone with the rare sound of his deep voice. "Stars above, Liva. You have got to stop sneaking up on people like that. I almost ran you through."

As much as Liv liked to talk, it always baffled Tove how she could be so quiet in her steps.

"Oh, hush, Ødg, you are not quick enough with the blade to nick a sleeping elk."

Ødger's mouth flew open, but before he could argue, Liv dragged him down by his tunic and planted a kiss on his cheek. Liv was tall but still a head shorter than Ødg, and she was the only person he would stoop for. She laughed when he growled for the third time and shoved between her brothers, beaming as she presented the bouquet.

Behind her, Reidar came in with his own gift: an intricately woven crown of flowers that matched Liv's bundle. She blinked back tears at faint memories of a young Reidar weaving wreaths of flowers and vines for her and her sisters. He'd always done whatever he could to make them happy, to keep them safe.

"Oh," Tove breathed, her fingers flying to her lips as she looked between Liv's flowers and Reidar's crown. "They are both so beautiful." She laid the bouquet across her arm as Reidar came behind and gently placed his crown over her braid.

The room was much too small for all her siblings and Liv's monstrous spring bouquet, but Tove could only smile. If Randi had asked her to clean every stable in Volsby or spend her days scraping hides as a tanner's assistant, she would have done it with a happy heart to have this one moment. But the Shieldmaiden had presented a handsome, blond Norðmann with a smile that could melt the sun, and he asked her to be his wife.

"Ready?" Reidar asked, a hint of silver lining his eyes.

She nodded and turned toward the door. It was Kåre who offered his arm to lead her toward the man she would marry, uniting their clans and forming an important alliance.

The Norðmenn were known for their violence, destruction and power. They had few foreign allies. Even the weak accords once made with the Frisians had crumbled under the struggle to control the seas, and the Northlands had gained another enemy. Like the Vestmen from Scotland, Frisians—if not slain on sight—were only accepted as slaves in the Northlands now. The same was true for Norðmenn who landed on Frisian shores.

With the rumors of a violent movement against those who would follow The Christ sweeping through the Northlands, and the constant threat of attack from other Viking Chieftains seeking to grow their power, the need for strong partnerships was greater than ever.

Despite the haunting memories from her past, Tove was proud to be a part of their fight against darkness. With this handfasting, the abundant iron ore in Járnheimr would fully outfit Randi's army with much-needed weapons and pave the way for an entire settlement of pagan Norðmenn to hear the Truth. Járnheimr was equally pleased, as their position near the bogs diminished their ability to grow barley, rye, and wheat, which would be readily available to them now due to Volsby's fertile farmland.

Kåre walked stiffly at her side as they turned to exit the back of the hall to the clearing where Dæg would be waiting.

"Three winters is not long enough," he said in their special language, his voice gruff.

"I know." Tove squeezed his arm, answering in the same secret tongue. She, too, wished they'd had more time together with all the siblings they'd thought they'd lost.

"Are you afraid?" he asked.

"No, not at all," she said, pressing her lips together.

"You know you are a terrible liar. Do you want to marry this man? Tell me the truth." Kåre glanced at her, doubtless trying to peer through any mask she might have donned.

"I know why you ask, Kåre." Her mind threatened to replace her hopeful anticipation with the terror she felt under the hurtful hands of Farmer, but she closed her eyes and forced the memories to retreat.

"I do feel a little anxious about being touched in such a way, and I think it would take many winters to truly know everything there is to know about a person. But what I do know of Dæg, I believe he will be a good husband. So, yes, I want to marry him."

Kåre nudged her with his elbow. "Sweet, trusting Tove. You always see the best in people. You even tried with those...people." She knew he meant the farmer and his wife. When he tugged her close again, his brows dipped together. "I love that about you, but be careful in your new home. Do not give your trust away without caution."

"Yes, brother," Tove lay her head on his shoulder as they walked. "I know you worry, but I will do this for Volsby and for the Shield-maiden who gave us back our family. Because of her, what I thought was the worst day of my life became my best day."

"Mine too." Kåre's voice was as quiet as hers.

She looked up at her brother, remembering the way he'd blinked into the light when the stable had been opened. How his fists and fingers were bloodied from his attempts to pry open the door, his bruised face dirty and streaked with tears they were never allowed to shed. How he flew to his feet, prepared to fight an army to protect her.

"Randi would not lead me into danger," she assured him. "And if love is born from this, all the better."

"Better you than me," he grumbled.

"One day you will meet someone who will turn your teasing into pining," she laughed. "I bet you will become the most romantic of all men."

He made a gagging noise in the back of his throat, drawing more giggles from Tove.

"I will miss you, Kåre. Even your tricks and schemes, and your joking, loveless heart." Tove felt her chest tighten, barely able to push her next words through trembling lips, "You are my oldest and best friend."

Without looking, she heard him suck in a breath, and his arm tightened in hers. She was quite surprised he hadn't slipped toads into her boots or coated her shift with itching nettles. With a sigh, he

reached under her giant bouquet of flowers and into the little pouch on the belt at her waist.

“What are you doing?” she hissed.

“You made me feel guilty, so I am sparing you my pranks.” He opened his palm, revealing a handful of wiggling worms. Before Tove could shriek and pull away, Kåre jerked her close, cutting his eye toward Reidar and Ødger, who walked behind them. “Shh, our brothers will pummel me, especially that giant one. I do not want to meet your new clan with a bloody lip and swollen eyes. I must be able to recognize their faces if I ever need to hunt them down.”

“Kåre!” Tove faked her anger as he discreetly tossed the worms. “What was your plan? Did you train them to wiggle free upon hearing the vows?”

“Of course not.” Kåre huffed a laugh. “They would have worked themselves out right about the time for the kiss.”

She couldn’t help the giggle that tore up her throat, but it faded as they rounded the side of the hall.

Randi Helgidóttir, dressed in a deep blue overdress and bearing her sword belt, waited at the crest of the hill that bordered one side of the ceremonial clearing below. Tove always felt a tightening in her chest upon seeing the Shieldmaiden—a deep respect for what Randi had done for her.

Randi’s lips broke into a wide grin upon seeing Tove, and she captured her with strong arms.

“Tove, you are lovely.” Randi drew back, her light brown eyes snagging on the crown of flowers adorning Tove’s head, her smile growing. When her gaze found Tove’s again, a tremble passed through Tove’s limbs. Kåre’s hand settled on her elbow, but he remained silent as Randi’s expression turned serious. “I am so honored that you, my Tove, my dottír, will be going forth to speak for Volfsby. There is no one I trust more to represent us well.”

“I only hope to make you proud.” Tove’s voice fought to crawl up her throat past the swell of emotion.

“You already have.” Randi withdrew a sword from the sheath at her side and laid the blade across her flattened palm. The hilt was

formed into the shape of an eagle's head, its feathers delicately crafted by the talented hand of an artist-smith. Elaborate whorls crawled along the shiny blade, which was dotted with images of ships upon curling waves. Tove gasped at its beauty.

"I know you must miss your móðir terribly at a time like this," Randi said. "I can never take her place, but if you would accept it, I would like to offer my faðir's sword for you to present to your husband during the ceremony. This is obviously not the one my faðir was buried with but one he treasured almost as much."

Tove's fingers fluttered to her lips, and her eyes blinked away the burn growing behind them. "I..." She swallowed hard before she was able to speak again. "I do not feel worthy of such a gift, but I will gladly and gratefully accept it."

Kåre took Tove's bouquet so Randi could place the sword in Tove's hands as Reidar and Ødg came beside her, each marveling at the intricate details, the strength of the weapon, and the sharpness of its blade. Tove turned to her youngest brother, tilting her chin up to look into his brown eyes.

"Will you carry it for me, Ødg?" she asked softly.

His large hands were more gentle than she thought possible when he accepted the sword. He stepped back silently, his eyes drifting over the treasure in his grasp.

Randi wrapped her arms around Tove again, enveloping her in a motherly warmth she hadn't realized she was in desperate need of.

"Thank you," Tove whispered into Randi's shoulder. "For everything."

With a nod and a quick swipe of a finger under her eyes, Randi smiled again and walked ahead of Tove toward the clearing.

One arm through Kåre's and Liv's bouquet in her hands, she crested the hill. Her breath caught in her throat when she saw what waited. It was Dæg, his parents, and the law-speaker. That was all. The large crowd she'd expected was absent; Tove looked over her shoulder to find Reidar winking at her. They'd most likely be waiting at the hall for the feast, but for these few moments, she was spared too many watchful eyes.

She mouthed a “Thank you” and felt fortified by the love of her siblings. Dæg was speaking to his father, his back turned. His long blond braids lifted in a spring breeze. When his father whispered something in his ear, Dæg turned, and an appreciative grin broke across his lips. Tove’s heart leapt within her chest.

“Stars above,” Kåre swore, making that gagging sound again. “He is going to make me regret throwing out the worms.”

She would miss her family and the peaceful life she loved in Voflsby, but her future looked rather handsome, and she was doing something worthwhile for her people. She could feel Kåre’s reluctance as he left her standing a few steps from Dæg, her own limbs quaking with an equal mix of excitement and apprehension.

Isa took the flowers, leaving Tove’s arms empty and her fingers twisting together. Even with all she’d endured in her childhood, the dream of a loving family had remained. The hope of that dream coming true stood in front of her now, but he wore an indecipherable expression on his face.

Tove wavered in her steps, her body shrinking in on itself, trying to disappear. Had she done something wrong? Did he not like her dress? Her flowers? Her?

“You look—” Dæg’s breath came out in a rush, and he took her hands before the law-speaker instructed, as if he couldn’t help but touch her. He spread her arms, taking her in. “Tove, I have never seen anything as lovely.”

His hazel eyes roamed from the toes of her new boots, over the intricate details embroidered on her dress, to the bronze brooches on the straps, and finally up her flushed neck to her face. “I never imagined such a prize when my faðir made this arrangement.”

Tove felt her cheeks warm at his words, although the thought of being a possession reminded her of what had almost become of her life. But from a future Chieftain like Dæg, she knew it was a compliment, and she resolved to embrace it. From his mouth, words that had once filled her with dread now brought hope. This was the start of her new life, the forever home she’d always wanted, and she couldn’t help but smile.

Dæg sucked in a breath. "Your smile..."

Lowering her lashes, Tove felt her face flame. His finger came under her chin, gently lifting her face until their eyes met. He looked at her with wonder. "Do it again."

She eagerly obeyed.

"Beautiful," he said.

As her siblings took their places, Dæg's hand cupped her cheek, his thumb softly grazing her flushed skin. "I plan to be the cause of many more of your enchanting smiles, my wife. All sorrows forgotten."

In the little time they'd spent together, she had shared enough of her story with Dæg to let him understand what her early years were lacking. That he remembered had her pulse stuttering and her gaze locked onto his as if it were the only thing holding her up.

He spoke his vows without taking his eyes from hers, his voice smooth and genuine. When Tove presented Randi's gifted sword, his eyes widened with appreciation, and his father leaned in to marvel at its beauty. After binding their hands with a leather cord, the law-speaker invited them to seal their union with a kiss. Dæg stepped close, nearly chest-to-chest with her, and slid one large hand around her waist and the other along her neck. The pressure from his fingers urged her head back, lifting her lips to his.

"My perfect dove," he whispered against her mouth before closing the space between them.

His touch was so gentle, her worries and memories of brutality melted away. Hope for true happiness burst into a sweet, consuming song.

