

THE VALKYRIE

CARRIE COTTEN



CARRIE COTTEN
Gripping Christian Fiction

Copyright © 2025 Carrie Cotten

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Edited by Jennifer Q. Hunt and Sarah Stasik

Formatted by Brianna Goodwin

Paperback ISBN: 9798306026756

Hardcover ISBN: 9798316322435

ASIN: BoDS9Y9B52

✻ Formatted with Vellum

Valkyrie is compelling, classic Carrie Cotten! Strong faith threads woven through an intricately drawn story cast light in the darkest shadows and are perfect for today's messy world. Laden with power struggles, romantic angst, sparring, a devoted protector, daggers, swords, and a warrior woman, Valkyrie has it all!!

—Ronie Kendig, award-winning author of the Droseran Saga

Through Isa and Reidar, the reader is pointed to a love that holds fast through the valley of the worst this world has to offer, a love that binds wounds and restores beyond wildest expectation. Stirring, thought-provoking, and surprising in the best way—The Valkyrie stays with you long after the last page is turned. Superb storytelling.

—Kelly Ferguson, co-host of the Neverending TBR Podcast

Just when you think Carrie Cotten's books can't get any better, she proves you wrong! The latest installment in her beloved Huntress series delivers on all the things—sigh-inducing romance, beautifully fleshed out characters, heart-stopping twists, and profound spiritual themes. This book, in particular, examines some of the toughest subjects Carrie has ever tackled, including the sanctity of life, and she handles it all with the perfect balance

of delicacy and raw honesty. Isa and Reidar's story of healing and redemption is not to be missed, and I know it will resonate with readers for years to come.

—Ashton E. Dorow, author of the Royals of Acuniel series

To all who choose gratitude amidst the grief.

Psalm 13

For the choir director: A psalm of David.

O LORD, how long will you forget me? Forever?

How long will you look the other way?

*How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul,
with sorrow in my heart every day?*

How long will my enemy have the upper hand?

Turn and answer me, O LORD my God!

Restore the sparkle to my eyes, or I will die.

Don't let my enemies gloat, saying, "We have defeated him!"

Don't let them rejoice at my downfall.

But I trust in your unfailing love.

I will rejoice because you have rescued me.

*I will sing to the LORD
because he is good to me.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As always, all my gratitude goes to Jesus Christ, without whom I would have nothing. God is the author of my story, and I can only hope that all my stories reflect His presence and lead readers closer to Him.

Earthside, I have to thank my incredible team of editors, alpha readers, beta readers, expert consultants, friends, family, and last but not at all least, my amazingly supportive hype team. Nicole, thank you for your early input in turning this book into something that I am so proud to call mine. Brianna, Latisha, and Hannah, thank you for always being first readers. For all the laughs, chats, and reels. You are the sunshine of my life. Jennifer Q. Hunt, thank you for taking my dumpster fires and making them readable. Thanks to my awesome beta team, Christy, Heather, Myra, Dani, and Kelly, for adding that extra layer of feedback to push this story to the next level. Sarah Stasik, thank you for putting up with my comma issues and limiting the number of times characters are allowed to flick their gazes. Christine, thank you for making sure the historical part doesn't get me roasted by any hardcore Viking enthusiasts.

And to my husband, my protector, my prince. I love you beyond words, and you are always the inspiration for everything that is good, strong, tender, romantic, and heroic in these pages.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Isa—/Ee-suh/
Reidar—/Rye-dar/
Eowin—/Ay·uh·wn/
Cyrene—/Sih-reen/
Ysra—/Yur-sruh/
Bjorn—/Byorn/
Randi—/Ran-dee/
Volfsby—/Vulfs-bee/
Kaupang—/Kow-payng/
Sólset—/Sole-seht/
Kåre—/Kor-dthay/
Tove—/Tow-vuh/
Ødger—/oo-djuh/
Liv—/Leev/
Féhirðir—/feh-hi-thir/
Illrstaðr—/Ill-stray-thur/
Vitkl—/Vit-kul/

PROLOGUE

824 AD

A handful of silver pieces, a stack of intricately embroidered fabric, two beaded belts, and one gold necklace. The contents of one small chest comprised the entirety of her value. A single wooden box of bounty, collected over sixteen winters, meant to secure a handfasting.

That and the spinning wheel and loom mocking her from the corner of the room she shared with her mother. She was neither gifted at nor entertained by weaving or spinning. Since her mother had become Shieldmaiden of Volsby, the machines gathered dust from misuse.

Isa turned back to the future dowry waiting in the open trunk before her. Her palms were slick with sweat as she held open the heavy lid and ran her tongue over her lips, tasting salt.

If the summer heat didn't suffocate her, her mother's insufferable hovering would.

"Isa, stay close."

"Isa, where are you going?"

“Isa, do not leave my sight for even one second.”

Her mother hadn't gone that far, but Isa was certain she'd one day be confined to the Shieldmaiden's rooms, never to set foot outdoors again. She'd lived a captive of her cruel cousin's rule most of her life, and now her mother seemed intent on continuing her enslavement.

It had been three years since her cousin, Ysra, was ousted as Shieldmaiden. Wasn't that long enough for Isa to earn some freedom? By the stars, she was sixteen!

The unpromised dowry taunted her from its storage space. As was the way for her people, almost all the girls her age in the settlement were handfasted. Many had babes.

When she mentioned a union to her mother, Randi always gave a noncommittal answer and changed the subject.

“Do not be so quick to grow up, Isa.”

“There will be plenty of time for handfasting later, Isa.”

“I am holding out to use you for just the right alliance, Isa.”

Her mother didn't actually say those last words. But with Randi's resistance to discussing available lads in the village and refusal to offer a reason, Isa couldn't help but draw her own conclusions.

She had concluded that Randi Helgidóttir, Shieldmaiden of Volfssby, would keep her precious daughter under lock and key until a tempting enough alliance presented itself.

Even now, the steady thump of a drumbeat pulsed through the closed door of her room. Beyond her sleeping quarters, the rest of the village was dancing, singing, and feasting in celebration of the upcoming harvest.

Anders Rorsen would be there with his family. The sweet youngest son of a farmer would be flashing his brilliant smile and showing off dimples evident even beneath his short beard. His ocean eyes might be searching the crowd for someone who would catch his attention.

Isa snatched a softened deer-skin satchel and shoved items from the chest inside.

A handful of silver pieces.

It wouldn't be her who caught his eye.

A stack of intricately embroidered fabric.

No matter how handsome or charming she found him to be, his family had nothing to offer to help strengthen Volfsby's defenses.

Two beaded belts.

They were simple farmers.

One gold necklace.

Isa ground her teeth at the thought of Dagny Birgerdóttir spinning boldly, her sunkissed auburn locks flaring and catching the light of the lanterns and Ander's searching gaze. Dagny was one of the few other unwed girls of Isa's age. A perfect match for Anders with her sweet smile and simple life.

Thick swaths of fabric unfolded and poured out of the satchel, making Isa shriek with frustration and slam her fist against it. She flung one length back into the chest, opting to take only two smaller sections. The piece she tossed away fluttered into a heap, revealing a stitched design. She recognized it from her mother's stories: It told the tale of a father and siblings Isa had never met.

Her mother had told Isa how distraught she'd been when the boat carrying Isa's father and brothers never returned. Her sister, Astrid, the youngest at just thirteen, had disappeared the same night. Randi didn't learn until much later that Astrid had snuck aboard the boat and was the only survivor, shipwrecked in a foreign land. Overcome with grief, Randi didn't have the strength to defend Volfsby against her evil niece. Maybe that was the true reason her mother didn't arrange a handfasting. Maybe she thought she was sparing Isa heartache.

Tears slipped from her eyes, pushed by her rising anger from where they pooled. Her mother had promised a night of joy and freedom only to snatch it away, ordering Isa back to her room after a brawl broke out. The fight between two men who had indulged in too much mead had nothing to do with Isa, but her mother's overprotectiveness banished her to bed anyway.

Other emotions mixed in. Sorrow over family lost before she was born. Jealousy over Dagny's opportunity to dance with the only boy

she'd ever liked. Frustration at—and compassion toward—her mother for...for everything!

She slung a cloak around her shoulders, roughly pulling the hood over her head to conceal her noticeable moon-white hair. After stuffing an extra set of clothes and several days' worth of dried meat and bread into the bulging satchel, she went to the door.

A moment of doubt nearly turned her back to bed as she'd been instructed, but one peek through the cracked door converted the spark in her chest to a blazing fire of determination.

Anders was dancing with Dagny. She was in his arms, basking in the radiance of his dimples and sky-blue eyes. He laughed and pulled her close.

Isa slapped away tears that tickled her flaming cheeks and slipped through the door, keeping to shadows in the empty part of the great hall until she reached the back door. Everyone was in the throes of revelry and celebration; none noticed the small figure inching her way toward a darkened escape.

She listened for the crunch of boots to pass and fade, knowing her mother had a few men posted outside. When she was certain no one would see her, she pushed open the back door and glanced once more toward the crowd of villagers.

Sitting at a table in the center, surrounded by neighbors with faces flushed from drink and joy, her mother laughed. Hand on the latch, Isa hesitated.

She'd never disobeyed before, no matter how frustrated she had been. Her mother trusted her to obey. To return to her rooms and stay there if that's what the Shieldmaiden commanded. Her next step would break that trust.

A war between guilt and rebellion churned Isa's insides at the thought of Randi finding her bed empty later. Anders's boisterous laugh rose above the music, solidifying her defiance. Isa slipped out the door and into the night.

She scrambled through the brambled wood bordering Volfsby. The coins in her purse clinked together as she jogged, the soft sounds

a constant reminder that she'd broken trust and stolen from her mother.

"It would have gone to waste," she grumbled when a wave of guilt heated her already burning skin. She tore off the cloak, relishing a cool wisp of wind. "It would only be buried alongside my body when I die a lonely old woman. Might as well be used for something good."

A pinch along her arm drew a hiss of pain. Thorns from a bramblebush snagged her sleeves and overdress—as if the earth itself were reaching out in disapproval. A flash of her mother's panicked face filled her mind.

Why did Randi have to become Shieldmaiden? Why couldn't Astrid have stayed three winters ago and taken on the role after their cousin was overthrown? Instead, Astrid got to sail back across the sea with her dreamy husband and live an exciting life serving as captain in the Vestland queen's army.

Why couldn't someone else, anyone else, have taken over? Isa could have been a normal village girl, free to walk the paths of the settlement with her friends in the evenings after work was done. Free to dance with Anders at the feast.

She could have been the one in his arms tonight, making him smile. And later, he could have brought her a bouquet of purple thistle and primrose while his father spoke to her mother. They could have exchanged a modest dowry and bride price at their harvest-time handfasting.

She would have moved into his family home and lived a happy life surrounded by his siblings and their children. They would have an army of babes of their own. She would never be lonely again. She would have even learned to spin and weave.

Instead, Isa had been sent to bed like a child. Tomorrow, Dagny would bask in the sweet floral scent of her bouquet and choose threads for the tunic she'd stitch for Anders to wear at their handfasting. Nothing was fair. A sob broke through Isa's lips as she ignored thorny vines and hurtled away from the only home she'd ever known.

It wouldn't be forever. She'd return eventually—after she'd had

some time to live. One adventure. A few months to prove she was a woman who could stand on her own.

Kaupang. That's where she would go. She knew from her last trip there that dozens of ships coursed in and out of the port. She'd watched her sister bargain for passage and learned which types of ships to seek out and which to steer clear of. She could find a boat headed for the Vestlands and set sail on an adventure like Astrid. Her sister was like the Valkyrie in the stories of the gods they used to worship. She was majestic and brave—strong and fierce. She was the reason their cousin no longer ruled Volsby with tyranny.

Astrid was all the things Isa wanted to be but was kept from learning because of her mother's fear.

Perhaps she would find a charming, muscled warrior of her own on this adventure. One she liked more than Anders, who would most likely be betrothed to Dagny after that dance she witnessed. If she returned to Volsby with a husband, there wouldn't be anything her mother could do about it.

It would take her several days to walk to Kaupang; she hurried her pace. The feast would end soon, and the moment her mother noticed Isa missing, there would be no end to the searching.

Once she got to Kaupang, she could send word. She wouldn't leave her mother in fear of what happened to her, not after knowing Randi lived nearly fourteen years not knowing what happened to her husband and other children. But Isa knew something *had* to happen to her. She could not continue to live this non-existence, only venturing as far as the woods surrounding the great hall for the rest of her life.

Even if her mother conceded and sought a husband for her, it wouldn't be one of her choosing. It wouldn't be Anders.

Even worse, her mother might make good on her threats to train Isa as the future Shieldmaiden of Volsby. To Randi, this was a glorious future—an honored experience others would covet.

But to Isa, such a position meant more chains. When Ysra was Shieldmaiden, she was holed up in the great hall, miserable all the time and ensuring everyone else was even more so. Especially Randi

and Isa, who Ysra kept as little more than prisoners because Randi was the true heir and Ysra lived in constant fear of opposition.

Now that Randi was Shieldmaiden, things in Volsby were better, but it didn't seem like her mother had much freedom or happiness. She often overheard Randi crying herself to sleep over this *honor*.

Isa stomped through the woods, caring not for the noise she made. She only cared about those ships and that sea. She cared about having such memories that would sustain her throughout the remainder of her dull, unfair life.

The wolves began to howl, singing their haunting song long through the night, and she nearly changed her mind and made for Volsby. But when morning came and she'd not been eaten, she decided a night alone under the stars was the first of many exciting bits of a story she would have to tell.

For several long days she traveled, always listening for the sounds of hoofbeats from her mother's warriors. Always battling back the nagging urge to turn around and go home.

When she finally reached Kaupang, she nearly abandoned her quest again. The port city was much larger and more crowded than before. A wave of regret and fear pricked her skin before she forced her feet across the invisible border of the city.

Using some of her coin, she paid a lad to carry a message to Volsby. As he nodded, she squashed the sting of guilt deep in her chest.

She had to do this. Her mother would forgive her and eventually understand. Isa would return in a few months and take up the mantle of leadership—study whatever it was her mother wanted her to study. She would not reject her duty; she just...couldn't accept it yet.

Drawing a resolved breath, Isa turned, ready to march to the docks and find passage west. But when she whirled on her heels, she crashed directly into the wall of a large cloaked figure.

"Oh," she yelped as the man's hands grabbed her shoulders to steady her. "I am sorry."

"No need to apologize, Little Star."

That voice...Isa froze. It couldn't be.

He was dead.

But there was only one person who'd ever called her *Little Star*. She'd hated it when she was a child—despised it even more as she grew and his teasing tone lowered into something darker that she didn't understand.

Her pulse thrummed hard in her ears, drowning out the sounds of a bustling port around her. He chuckled cruelly when her knees went weak and she sagged under his crushing grip.

No. No, no, no, no. She squeezed her eyes closed. This was just a dream, a nightmare. She was still asleep in the woods on the way to Kaupang. Any moment, she would wake up and take herself directly back to Volsby. She'd learned her lesson. Her mother would yell, and she would be banished to their rooms for the remainder of her days. But all of that was a welcome outcome if she weren't truly facing this ghost.

He gave her a shake. "Let me see those beautiful eyes, Little Star."

When she didn't obey, his fingers dug into her skin until she cried out and her eyes flew open. His face was shadowed by the hood of the cloak, but his mouth was in full view. Thin lips curled up at the sides; his smile was hard and hungry. Her stomach churned, warning her she had made a very costly mistake.

She'd known him her whole life, but her mother had always been there, tucking Isa behind her back. Her mother was not here now.

"Hello, Isa." He tipped his chin, allowing the gray morning light to illuminate his face.

As his two-colored eyes fell on her, nothing sounded more wonderful than the simple life she'd run away from in Volsby. No grand adventure lay ahead. The punishing grip on her shoulder proved she wasn't dreaming, but the man sneering down at her was a nightmare that would likely claim her life. The lad bearing her letter had already sprinted from the market. Her mother would not come looking for her—no one would.

Her arms were locked at her sides, but her fingers drifted to the straps of the satchel carrying the bounty that represented her worth.

"Take it." She wiggled the sack from her shoulders, still unable to

lift her arms as he crushed them to her side. Her heart pounded in her chest, every muscle and nerve alight with terror. “Take whatever you want.”

A draugr stood before her. Not the monster from myth and legend—a true undead creature with eyes that had always turned the air in her lungs to choking fog. He drew her closer, his hot breath searing her skin.

“Oh, Little Star, I plan to do just that.”

CHAPTER 1 - ISA

825 AD

A hand on Isa's shoulder sent her hand flying to her heart, which jumped inside her as she nearly leaped from the bench. She turned to meet her mother's brown eyes and laughed nervously.

"You startled me." She looked up at her mother, who had returned from working her way through the feasting settlers in the hall.

"Sorry, dóttir." Worry filled the Shieldmaiden's light brown eyes. "I will be speaking soon. Did you want to say anything?"

"Oh," Isa stammered. She'd endured a full week of community meals since she returned to Volsby, and still, the idea of having every eye on her pushed her already racing heart toward another escape attempt. "No, I do not t-think I s-sh—"

"Isa." Her mother saved her with a pat on her back. "There is no rush. When you are ready."

Isa offered a weak but grateful smile and stared at her barely touched food as Randi turned to address an approaching settler.

She was rescued a year after she'd foolishly hurtled through the

night—wanting something to happen in her boring, lonely life and seeking an adventure she would never find.

Something had happened. Nothing at all like she'd imagined. Certainly nothing that she wanted.

But she was alive. She was home, returned to the bustling great hall where her mother and every member of Randi's warband and their families lived.

Every day was filled with noise. So much noise. She didn't miss one instant of the year she'd been in captivity with *him*, but being freed hadn't provided the peaceful existence she'd dreamed of.

Tonight's nattmal was no different. The hall was packed for the shared evening meal. More than once, Isa's vision had darkened, her consciousness nearly stolen as her breath shallowed at every slam of a mug on wooden tables, every outburst of laughter from Randi's warriors.

It was meant to be a joyous time of togetherness, but Isa wanted nothing more than to hide. If it weren't for Randi's constant praise to God for Isa's return, she might have done just that.

Her mother had fallen into a strange pattern of giving her space while also being suffocatingly close. She was always near, always watching. Isa had broken Randi's heart when she left. She'd forced her mother to live with grief, fear, and uncertainty. It hadn't been intentional; she certainly didn't mean to get abducted.

Isa shook her head. Even if she hadn't been taken—if she'd boarded a ship like she planned—what had she thought Randi would feel?

That was it. She hadn't thought. Not about anyone but herself. She would never do that again. When Randi rose, commanding the attention of the room with a single raised hand, Isa couldn't help but smile.

She was proud of her mother—for all she'd overcome and all she'd built from the ashes the former Chieftain and his wife, her own cousin, had left behind when they were overthrown.

"It has been four winters since we gained our freedom," Randi spoke over the quiet crowd. "The God above all gods has blessed us

with bountiful harvests, fruitful trade voyages, and years of peace. Let us praise Him for all of His merciful gifts and the feast we now enjoy.”

What the Shieldmaiden didn’t say was that she’d spent those four years working to turn Volsby away from the false Norse gods and toward the One true God she now praised. There was still work to do, but they’d come so far. Isa also knew Volsby would suffer if Randi gave all her attention to her ghost of a daughter.

“And again,” Randi continued, softer now, her eyes shimmering as she looked lovingly at Isa. “I give endless praise for the safe return of my dóttir.”

The hall broke into shouts of joy, and all eyes turned on her. She felt as choked as when *he* used to keep her tethered to his side with a rusted, pinching chain around her neck. Randi raised her mug, finishing her prayer, and everyone finally turned their attention elsewhere. Isa pressed her palm to her chest to remind her lungs of their duty and tapped her fingers against her neck to ensure there was no chain.

I know you are with me. I... Even in her unspoken prayers, she stumbled over her words, caught between honesty and reverence. But she knew The Christ could see through everything she tried to hide, straight into the very depths of her. *I do not know why I am here, what my purpose is now. Why I had to...* Isa squeezed her stinging eyes closed and inhaled deeply. *Thank you for saving me.*

“Isa, are you well, dóttir?”

Isa opened her eyes at Randi’s quiet question and immediately regretted it. Entering the hall, dimples on full display, was Anders Rorsen. A very pregnant Dagny trailed behind him. Dagny gazed up at him the way Isa had once, eyes rounded with adoration. Isa waited for the twist of jealousy, but when Anders slipped his arm behind Dagny’s back, Isa flinched with discomfort.

There was not a drop of envy in her—not a hint of desire for the man she once hoped to marry. Instead, when Anders’s lips landed on Dagny’s cheek, Isa felt like she was being consumed by a million starving ants.

“Isa?” Randi’s fingers curled gently around her arm, and Isa jerked her hands into her lap.

She rubbed the skin her mother had touched, expecting to find an angry, red burn. Phantom singes danced along her own spine as Anders affectionately ran his hand over Dagny’s back. Realizing her mother was still waiting for an answer, she cleared her throat.

“Yes, I am just tired.” She’d had little energy in the days since her return just a week before, and she spent many hours napping. It seemed no amount of rest was enough.

The healer said it was normal given what she’d endured. She might truly be exhausted, or it might be her body’s way of avoiding the people who constantly moved about in the hall.

“Do you wish to go to our rooms?” Randi leaned in, obviously trying to hide her concern from those nearest to them. Few of the settlers knew what had happened in the time Isa was gone or who she’d been with.

“No. I am fine.” She felt her lips pull back, but from Randi’s reaction, she knew her attempt at a smile had failed. Much like her latest spinning projects.

Her expression most likely matched the mangled mess of frayed thread hidden in a corner of their room. Her mending and weaving skills had not magically improved in her absence.

She tried not to complain—tried to humbly fall back into the routine of life in the settlement. She tried to be so thankful she’d been rescued that nothing but joy could live in her heart.

But when she was honest, there was no joy at all. There wasn’t much of anything. Certainly not the childish desire to explore the world and find a legendary romance that had coaxed her to leave Volsby in the first place.

Isa took one more look at Anders and Dagny and shuddered. The longing that once drove her to abandon her homeland might as well now be housed in the heavens.

“Do you wish to dance?” Randi nodded to where girls and young women had linked arms and were skipping in time to the music.

That desire had faded as well, and Isa merely shook her head, forcing another weak smile.

Now that they worshipped the God called Christ, they no longer celebrated Álfablót at the end of Autumn. There would be no prayers or sacrifices to the elves. But they still celebrated—perhaps more now than ever. Any occasion sparked a feast, and her mother urged the people to give thanks in all things to their Creator. Even deaths were no longer a solemn occasion for believers but a night of feasting and song for the one who'd gone on to eternity with The Christ.

She was happy for her people, for the peace and freedom many had found. But all she could think of the entire evening was finding a quiet retreat. A place where there was no sound, no bright flickering lanterns, nothing. When a small scuffle broke out between two lads, a well of hope sprang to life. Perhaps Randi would usher her away. Randi only rubbed Isa's back, sending that same flame licking down her spine, before she broke up the fight and returned to enjoying the feast.

It was so painful. She didn't know how to describe it, even to herself, except to say that everything hurt. Sound, light, speaking, her mother's tender touch—even the feel of her clothes—irritated her skin. Every touch, every texture, scraping and rubbing—driving her near insanity.

But she loved her mother and her community.

So, she tolerated the festivities. She didn't excuse herself early. But when everyone went to their rooms and her mother joined an evening patrol, the thrumming under her skin hadn't eased. She shed her overdress and loosened her braids, hoping to find relief from the constant suffocating pressure.

When none was found, she crept through the night to the shore of the river instead of pacing the short length of her room for hours.

She should have been afraid, for *he* was still out there somewhere. But *he'd* taken everything. She clutched the dagger Revna made her promise to carry at all times—a remaining sliver of self-preservation, perhaps only for her mother's sake.

After her rescue, the weeks it took to reach Volsby had provided

plenty of opportunities to watch and learn fighting skills. Thanks to the wild raven-haired woman from the Vestlands, who was as terrifying as she was tiny, Isa knew how to handle a blade.

The thought of having to make use of those lessons unleashed a wave of heated nausea in Isa's stomach. Vivid memories came flooding back. *His* hands on her skin. *His* breath on her neck. *His* threatening voice saying, *You are mine, Little Star*. She picked up speed and hurried to the river.

She just needed an hour. One hour by herself in the quiet night. An hour free of everything. She toed off her leather slippers, hid her dagger inside one, and stepped from the cool grass to the rocky shore.

Stooping, she picked up a single smooth stone, turning it over in her fingers.

She raised it to her mouth, the cool surface against her lips. After three deep breaths, she dropped the stone and ventured further.

The water called. It sang a song so soft the noise was no longer painful. When her toes met the icy reach of the river, a numbness settled into her bones. Each step brought it higher. Water soaked the linen of her night shift and crawled up her legs and thighs. It rose past her waist to her neck. She inched into the deepest part of the river.

It was not enough. The fabric of her shift, thin as it was, pulled and tugged. Isa clawed at her clothes until she was free. She flung the wet fabric to the shore, where it landed near her slippers with a resounding splat. A long, satisfied sigh escaped her lips despite the fleeting thought of how cold and exposed she would be walking home in a wet night shift.

It didn't matter. The water was the only thing she could stand against her skin. It was a numbing cold that whisked away wretched memories—if only for a few moments.

She drew in a deep breath, dipped below the surface, and the world was gone. Only the soft bubbling of water. The soothing waves on her bare skin. No curious eyes passing over her.

We are so glad you have returned, Isa.

Your móðir was fraught with worry, Isa.

Back where you belong, with us, Isa.

Her neighbors and friends meant well, but their words felt like blades scraping her bones. They were a constant reminder of everything she'd endured, triggering questions in her mind. All the *what-ifs* beyond the obvious: *What if she'd never left?* What if she'd delayed an hour? What if she'd turned one way instead of the other in the port city? What if she'd made any of a thousand different choices?

She surfaced, drew in another breath, and pushed further below, pressing the heels of her palms against her ears to quiet the voices in her head.

Randi had kept her ordeal quiet, but Isa couldn't hide the hollowness in her eyes or the way her cheeks sunk in from a year with barely enough food to survive.

There, below the surface, no one was watching. No one asked questions that sent unwanted memories invading her mind, scratching, clawing, and pushing. Always pushing. Just like *him*.

Under the freezing water, she could be still. Weightless and floating. She could be alone. Her lungs burned, but she remained, using her arms to keep her below the surface until they became so heavy with cold that she could no longer move them. Just when her lungs threatened to burst and fill themselves with water, she pushed her foot against the rocky bottom.

But when her toes met a smooth stone on the river bottom, it shifted. Her ankle smashed against another rock, and she was trapped.

Isa bent her knees, trying to bring her upper body down against the current to reach the stone, but the water worked against her. She barely caught the edge of the rock before she was torn away. Pain shot up her leg as she was jerked by the current.

Her lungs raged with need, and white bursts flashed behind her eyelids. Panic seized her, and her heart thundered against her ribs. She was going to die. Everyone would think she did this to herself. Her mother...

God, you heard me once when I had no voice. Hear me again. Please!

Isa tried repeatedly to move the rock. She kicked with her free

foot, sending more spears of pain up her leg. She'd done what her mother had feared: Slipped off again, alone in the night, and found herself in death's clutches. She'd only meant to stay for a few moments, but her mother would never know. Randi would think...*Oh God, my móðir. She will have no one left.*

No matter how she tried to keep them closed, Isa's lungs opened, and a torrent of icy water flooded in. She'd survived a full year of nightmares, survived *him*, to die by her own foolishness.

As her mind faded to unconsciousness and her body convulsed, rejecting the water that invaded her lungs, she felt a comforting warmth under her arms and a release of the crushing pain around her ankle. Just as she had every day when she was in the most hopeless of circumstances, she held onto gratitude. When all was lost, when all she could feel was pain and fear, she thanked God for the one thing she could never lose.

Thank you for saving me. I know you are with me.