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Opening extract from

Sigrun's Secret

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Chapter 1

The young colt tossed his head nervously as I tried to slip the bridle on.

"Steady, boy!" I said soothingly, stroking his neck. A sudden breeze whipped my hair forward, startling the horse and making him tug at his halter. The wind was bitter today, despite the fact that it was sun month; supposedly the warmest month of the year. It was blowing straight off the sea, whipping up white-topped waves and rippling the grasses and flowers on the open hillside.

I cast a glance out to sea, hoping for a glimpse of a sail. It was my father's sail especially I was looking for. But the broad bay was empty, as ever, and so was the open water beyond it. I returned my attention firmly to the horse.

"I've spent so much time with you," I sighed, stroking his velvety nose. "Why are you still so wild? You should have been broken in the spring, but there's only so much I can manage by myself."

"Surely you won't try to ride him without help, Sigrun?" asked a gruff voice behind me. It was my turn to jump. I turned and saw Erik, my father's most trusted worker, standing there, his back stooped and his face lined with the many winters of his life. He was a freeman like everyone who lived with us. It was my father's house and farm and he didn't hold with slavery.

"He's quite gentle now," I said defensively, and not quite truthfully.

Erik straightened himself with a grimace of pain and stared at me from under his brows. "So in other words, you *were* planning to ride him?"

"Yes. I'd like him to be well-behaved for when my father returns home," I said.

Erik turned aside slightly, hiding a smile. "What your father will care about is seeing you in one piece, not how many horses you've broken," he said, but I knew he understood.

"With Ingvar and Asgrim gone, there's only me," I said, smiling coaxingly, knowing that Erik was likely to be sympathetic.

Most of the men from our settlement were away. My father had only sailed along the coast to trade at the summer market and would be back soon. Our neighbour Helgi on the other hand, had been gone for a year, all the way south to Dublin, trading. He'd taken his son and my elder brother with him. None of us knew how long they'd be away. I so wished they'd come back this summer, but I hardly dared hope for it.

Erik sighed, recalling my thoughts from my absent friends and family. "I'll give you a hand then," he said, good-naturedly.

"As long as I'm not making you neglect your work?" I asked.

"The others can manage without me for a while."

"Thank you," I said with a grateful smile.

Between us we coaxed the bridle and then the saddle onto the colt, which, as yet, had no name. Erik held him steady, speaking soothingly, while I climbed onto his back. The young horse stood there snorting nervously, every muscle in his body rigid with tension. I knew he'd bolt at the slightest opportunity. I'd backed him twice before and he hadn't relaxed for an instant.

Slowly, carefully, Erik led the horse inland. After jibing a few times the colt allowed himself to be led, pulling nervously at the reins from time to time. I praised him. He pricked his ears up and walked willingly, but he was sweating with the strangeness of it all, his muscles still bunched up tight.

We walked a fair distance before turning for home. The colt was quieter now, beginning to feel tired. He'd had enough for one morning and Erik and I both had other work to be getting on with.

As we rounded the edge of the hill, the view of the bay opened up before us once more. The clouds were clearing and the water sparkled in the strong summer sunshine. Erik and I both gasped.

Gliding towards the head of the bay, their sails filled with the fresh, morning breeze, two ships were sailing towards us. It took only an instant for us to recognise the colours. On one ship, I could clearly see the stripe of green so laboriously woven into my father's sail over two long winters at the loom. And the other was…could it really be?

"Brown and yellow. Helgi's returned!" exclaimed Erik, stopping abruptly.

"And Father!" I cried excitedly, standing up in my stirrups for a better view. For one critical moment we'd both forgotten I was astride an unbroken horse.

The horse threw his head up, tearing the reins from Erik's grasp. My heart gave a sickening lurch as I realised he was free. I tightened the reins at once, trying to bring him under control, but he was quicker than I was. He snatched the bit, and before I even had time to think, he bucked.

I was no novice at breaking horses. But, unpardonably, my attention had been caught by the sight of those splendid ships, and my mind filled with excitement at this unexpected double homecoming. I hung on desperately, clinging to the saddle with my knees and to the horse's mane with both hands. I was thrown sideways and half slipped from the saddle. And while I was in this precarious position, my mount bolted.

The ground was rough and uneven, the grass growing in huge, unruly tufts. The horse thundered down the steep hillside with no care for danger. I was aware that one wrong step could leave him with a broken leg, no use to anyone. Even worse, he was heading straight down towards the cliff edge.

Slowly, painfully, I dragged myself upright and back into the saddle. My feet sought the flying, twisting stirrups that were probably terrifying the colt, banging into his sides. Once my feet were securely in them again, I dared to let go of his mane and gather up the reins. I fought desperately to get the youngster's head, but he had the bit firmly between his teeth, and could barely feel my tugging. I pushed my feet down, leaned back and pulled with all my strength. But my strength and will was nothing to the power and determination of a horse of three winters, in full flight. He would neither listen nor respond to my commands.

As the cliff-edge loomed closer, I could feel waves of terror washing through me. I pulled with all my strength on the left rein, trying to force the horse to at least turn away from certain death. When he still didn't respond, I considered jumping off his back and letting him go to his end alone.

But I couldn't abandon him. I just couldn't do it. He was a valuable colt. I didn't want to lose him, to let my father down. Surely I could turn him in time?

A great squawking and flapping erupted suddenly in front of us. Ptarmigans, hidden in the undergrowth with their chicks, caused the horse to rear and scream in fright. He was up on his hind legs, arching his neck, pawing the air, a mad flapping of feathers in front of him as the birds took wing, and this was my chance. I threw myself forward, fighting to hold my balance, and gathered the reins tight, regaining that vital contact with the horse's mouth. And then the birds were gone in a mad flapping of wings and I'd pulled the horse around. He bounded forward again, racing

along the shoreline, still resisting all my efforts to stop him. But his flight was no longer so ungoverned, so frantic. I was slowly gaining control; he was trembling beneath me as we galloped towards the head of the bay.

Ahead of us, the two ships were sailing straight onto the beach. The people from both households were already gathering to welcome them. As I battled to stop the runaway horse, I could see them waving and calling out, though the pounding hoof beats and the wind in my ears drowned the sound.

And, oh, the shame. My father's first sight on returning home would be his daughter on a runaway horse. He'd probably watched the whole, mad flight from his ship. Everyone would see my disgrace: my brother Asgrim, and my best friend Ingvar whom I'd not seen for over a year.

The sight of the crowd ahead slowed the horse. He dropped to a canter and then in response to my command, he stumbled into an exhausted walk. I saw my father jump ashore. His eyes were fixed on me as I rode up on his valuable colt, the animal lathered in sweat, flanks heaving with exhaustion.

My father walked straight towards me. The colt shied away from him half-heartedly, but was too tired to run any further. The welcoming crowd drew back, turning their eyes on me too, their voices hushing. My father signalled for someone to take charge of the horse. A fair, handsome stranger stepped forward and took the reins, but my eyes didn't leave Father's face. It was stern as he took in the state of the horse, and then looked up at me.

"Are you all right, Sigrun?" he asked. To my relief, there was no anger in him, only concern.

I nodded, aware I was shaking from head to foot. "I was just … breaking in the horse for you, Father," I said, unable to keep my voice steady.

And then he laughed and held his arms up to me. I tumbled into them, hugging him, crying with pleasure and relief that he was safely home again.

"I'll teach you to break horses in that way," he said mock-fiercely, tousling my windblown hair. "Look at the state of him. We'll be lucky if you haven't lamed him for life! Is that Erik I see, running after you?"

I looked back, guilty for the fright I must have given Erik. He was running down the hillside towards us, but as he drew closer and saw all was well, he stopped, bending double to catch his breath. "I'm sorry, Bjorn!" he called to my father.

"Poor Erik," teased my father. "He'll be relieved we're all back to keep a closer eye on you, Sigrun."

He set me on my feet again and turned away. I knew he was looking for my mother. She stepped forward, a woman of some five and thirty winters, retaining much of the beauty of youth in her glowing, happy features. She smiled at my father, warmly welcoming.

"Thora," he said, the word a caress. He walked to her and swept her up in his arms, holding her close.

Some of the people clapped with delight and cheered. At the same time, I saw our neighbour, Helgi, embracing Bera, who was weeping with joy to see her husband safely back. Other men, our free workers and Helgi's slaves, were also greeting their loved ones.

"Sigrun," said a deep, unfamiliar voice close to me. I turned, looking up questioningly at the tall, young man who held my horse. "If you want to race your horses, you should pit yourself against me," he said.

There was something familiar about him. As I looked, feeling shy about studying such a fair young man so closely, I caught my breath in surprise. "Ingvar?" I asked uncertainly.

My childhood playfellow had grown and changed so much in the year he'd been away that I hadn't recognised him. I realised I was staring, confused and admiring, and felt a little colour creeping into my face.

If you don't recognise *me*, do you at least know your brother?" Ingvar asked with a smile. H pulled Asgrim forward, taller, and bronzed from his long sea voyage. I hugged him eagerly.

"What's this supposed to be?" I asked, tugging affectionately at a new growth of fluff on his chin.

"Mind your manners, little sister,' he retorted. As we let each other go, Ingvar passed the reins to Asgrim and stepped forward offering an embrace too. I caught my breath, suddenly shy. But before I had time to think about it, I was stopped by a high-pitched keening sound behind me.

I whipped round and saw my mother standing rigid, her eyes glazed over, a far-away look on her face, her eyes glowing blue. She was experiencing the sight, I knew at once.

"Thora, what is it?" my father was asking, still holding her hands tight. "What do you see?"

My mother began to speak. Not, I knew, in response to my father's question, but because Freya, the goddess of prophecy, had chosen to speak through her. Her voice was deep and musical, as though it was Freya herself who spoke.

"They are coming again. Their garments are black as night. They carry torches in their hands, darkness and anger in their hearts."

With a convulsive shudder, she stopped speaking and fell forward. My father caught her in his arms and they looked into each other's eyes.

I didn't understand what my mother had seen. Her words meant nothing to me. But I knew she had visions when danger threatened. And that what the goddess showed her always came to pass.

Around us, voices were raised in fear and several women began to cry. I shivered, feeling a dark threat draw over us. The fright I'd just had, my concerns for the colt and the excitement of the homecoming faded into insignificance, swallowed up in a terrifying sense of dread.