

Rise of a Viking



Book One

By

Sky Purington

Chapter One

Winter Harbor, Maine
2016

“**H**ERE WE GO.” Cybil pressed down the cigarette boat’s throttle and grinned. “Hold on, Sis!”

Samantha squealed as they took off and raced along the coastline. The sun sat low in the sky and bright oranges and reds splashed across the choppy water.

This was the life.

Endless trees, the Atlantic Ocean, and a beautiful new home.

They didn’t cruise long before Samantha tapped Cybil’s arm and pointed toward the shore. Sean was standing at the end of the dock with his arms crossed over his chest. She throttled down so she could hear her sister.

“He looks pissed off again.” Samantha’s eyes slid her way. “What’d you do now?”

Sean was the former owner of the shoreside million dollar Chalet style house she and her sisters recently purchased. With floor-to-ceiling windows, it was a sweeping sentinel surrounded by thick pine trees.

“Sean spent his life on these waters, Sam,” Cybil reminded. “He gets edgy when I stay out here after dark.”

“I can’t say I blame him. It’s dangerous.” Sam nodded toward shore, her eyes alight with admiration. “Why don’t we head in so he doesn’t have to worry anymore.”

Well aware of Samantha’s interest in Sean, she rolled her eyes. “Get over it. He’s dating someone.”

“You mean waiting for some phantom girl to show up.” Samantha had a naughty gleam in her eyes. “That means he’s fair game.” One brow arched. “Then again, I’m starting to wonder if *you* aren’t the girl he’s waiting for.”

“Nope.” Cybil shook her head. “We’re just friends.”

“I dunno.” Samantha smirked. “He worries about you an awful lot. Too much I think.”

Cybil knew exactly why he worried but couldn’t share the reason with Sam because it was part of a vision. One of many she’d had due to her gift of prophecy. A gift she kept hidden from her sisters. But how much longer would that last? Especially considering the ongoing visions were connected to their new house.

Though tempted to test her luck against the elements, Cybil decided against staying out on the water. The winds had shifted, and dark clouds were rolling in from the Northwest. By the time they docked and Sean tied off the boat, he wore a heavy frown and mumbled something about her pushing her limits.

“Always good to see you, Sean,” Samantha chirped, eying him up and down before she murmured to Cybil in passing, “I think he doth protest too much.”

Already barefoot, Cybil stripped down to her bathing suit and said, “Join me, Sean,” before she dove off the end of the dock.

Naturally he didn’t, but started to cover the boat, his scowl still in place. “One of these days you’re gonna underestimate this bay and get in trouble.”

"I'm more than familiar with Frenchman Bay and a great deal of the New England coast," she reminded him as she floated on her back and enjoyed the ebb and flow of gentle waves. "So relax."

"Because of what you learned in books," he said. "This isn't Lake Champlain, Cybil. It's a different beast altogether."

"Hence me learning about it not only through books but through you," she pointed out. "I've been here for over six months and out on these waters for almost three." She met his eyes. "I have a great deal of respect for the sea, Sean. I don't take unnecessary chances."

His eyebrows shot up. "That's all you do."

Maybe. But he didn't need to know why. After all, being a prophet had its advantages. For the most part, she knew just how far she could push things. Which, when all was said and done, took the risk out of everything and was pretty damn boring.

What she wouldn't do for a little adventure sight unseen. Yet she knew that was exactly what she had to avoid right now.

Especially here.

Her eyes went to the house, and she tightened her jaw as she remembered the lawyer who showed up at her home in upstate Vermont eight months ago. He had come to deliver paperwork that made her and her sisters the sole beneficiaries of Jaqueline's inheritance. A woman she knew vaguely through her cousin Erin. And Jaqueline, who preferred to be called Jackie, was extremely wealthy.

Yet Cybil read between the lines.

She knew the Scottish lawyer was not from this century. But what genuinely caught her off guard was that both Jackie and even Erin were no longer part of this century, either. Regrettably, she couldn't sense anything else. Soon after—as she did foresee—Sean contacted her about buying the house. Concerned about Erin, she immediately took him up on his offer. What she discovered within a month of moving in had only added to her worries.

"You're looking at the house in that funny way again," Sean said softly.

"You know me," she said as thunder rumbled across the sky. "I'm just lost in thought."

"Yeah, I know." Like always when he caught her staring at the house, he didn't quite meet her eyes. He was hiding something.

"You've been lost in thought a lot lately," he murmured.

"Why did you really contact me about buying this house, Sean?" She kept floating. "Please, just tell me the truth."

"I did. I have." His eyes finally found hers. "I don't need a place this big and wanted to buy something closer to work. Now that I own a fleet of fishing boats, things are busy, and I need to be there more often."

"Uh huh." She started drifting toward shore. "And it just so happens that a Scottish realtor contacted you to let you know we were looking to buy."

"Yup," he said.

"Ironic wouldn't you say?" She eyed him. "That you had a Scottish realtor, and I had a Scottish lawyer. Kinda hard to believe, if you ask me, considering how few Scotsmen there are around these parts."

Sean shrugged, picked up her clothes and kept pace. She could admit he was handsome with his rugged looks and tall, wide-shouldered build. He had that whole square-jawed, dark stubble thing going on. It drove at least half her sisters crazy.

“One of these days you’ll be straight with me about what you know,” she said. “And I’ll appreciate it when you are.”

As usual, Sean wasn’t offended in the least but smoothly shifted the conversation. “Your latest batch of photos arrived while you were out.”

“Oh yeah?” She grinned as she waded out of the water. “How do they look?”

“I have no idea. I knew you’d want to see them first, so I didn’t open them. But I’m sure they’re great,” he said, his voice a little gruff as his eyes swept over her before he wrapped a towel around her shoulders. “You’ve got talent, sweetheart.”

“Naw.” They walked up the embankment. “Just good timing.”

She’d always loved photography and had a knack for capturing images that resembled mythological creatures. Mainly dragons.

“It must be some damn good timing.” He slanted her a look. “Because it’s made you famous.”

“I suppose.” Now it was her turn to redirect the conversation as she looked at the old, gnarly tree to the right of the shore. “Is it me or has that ash grown since I moved in?”

The wind picked up, thunder rumbled, and rain started spitting.

Sean shrugged again. “I can’t see how. It seems pretty old.”

When she headed that way, he shook his head. “Gonna be a bad storm. We should head inside.”

Cybil’s eyes went to the dark horizon. She was surprised when she sensed nothing about the weather’s outcome. That was unusual. And a little exciting.

Drawn as always, she approached the tree, caught by the sway of its leaves. Careful not to trip, she navigated around the thick, spindly roots crawling over the ground. Some even extended down the rock ledge into the water.

She stopped at the trunk and stared up through the branches, startled by a rush of exhilaration. Shadows danced overhead, twisting and flipping until flickers of light morphed into designs caught in the wind-driven leaves.

“Sean,” she murmured and held out her hand, her eyes never leaving the tree. “Give me your cell phone please.”

“Good thing it’s waterproof,” he muttered as he handed it over.

“I’d hope so,” she whispered. “You’re a fisherman.”

Cybil clicked into the camera, aimed the phone and started snapping pictures. Something was taking shape in the tree.

Something huge and magnificent.

Thunder echoed across the sky, and lightning flashed.

“Cybil darling. Sean,” Mema Angie called from the deck. “You two really should come inside!”

“When did Mema Angie get here?” Cybil said as she snapped away.

“She was here when I arrived.” Sean took her elbow. “C’mon, she’s right. It’s time to get inside.”

“Just a few more seconds.” The sky grew darker. Caught in quickly vanishing sunlight, the leaves stood vibrantly green against soupy clouds. “Just look at this.”

“I am. Let’s go. Now,” he said as it began to pour.

“All right.” Cybil handed the phone back and was about to follow him when the root at her feet caught her attention. “What the?” she whispered and crouched. “Look at this.”

Sean crouched and frowned at what had caught her attention.

“Is this what I think it is?” She ran her fingers over the intricately designed symbol carved in the wood. “Because it looks just like a depiction of Yggdrasill.”

The Yggdrasill was supposedly an immense ash tree that connected the Nine Worlds in Norse mythology. Something she knew about because she’d spent ample time studying Norse culture since she first arrived.

Since she had first seen the man standing beneath this tree in her visions and dreams.

“Give me your phone again,” she said. “Quick!”

Troubled, Sean gave her the phone. “You’ve got ten seconds.” Lightning zigzagged down into the ocean, and thunder roared. “Make that five.”

Cybil took several pictures before Sean grabbed her hand and bolted. By the time they made it inside, they were drenched and laughing.

“Stay right there and dry off before you track it across the floor,” Mema Angie scoffed, smiling as she handed them warm towels. “Crazy kids.”

“Not me.” Sean pointed at Cybil and shook his head. “Her.”

“He’s right.” Cybil grinned. “But I’m working on making him a little nutty too.”

Mema Angie chuckled and headed for the kitchen. A longtime friend of Sean’s and now Cybil and her sisters’, Mema Angie was an enigma. She had the personality of a cheerful matron and the looks of a well-kept fifty-something though she was somewhere close to seventy. With snowy blond hair, a lithe build, surprisingly smooth skin and bright green eyes, she still turned men’s heads.

“I’ve made lobster rolls for dinner,” Mema Angie said. “Go change then we’ll eat.”

Wearing a fitted tank top and short shorts, Samantha lay belly down on one of the large suede couches, flipping through a magazine. She tossed her heavy mass of long red curls over her shoulder and eyed Sean with a grin. “Why risk getting the floor all wet? I say you peel outta those clothes right there.”

“Don’t be lewd, dear,” Mema Angie called out.

“That’s not *lewd*, Mema.” Samantha winked at Sean. “Just practical.”

“Rumor has it Julie will be coming to Winter Harbor in a few weeks, Sean,” Mema Angie said. “I know you two have reconnected. You must be looking forward to seeing her.”

That was her way of reminding Samantha that there was another woman involved. An ongoing battle when it came to her sisters and Sean.

“I’m grabbing a shower.” Cybil headed upstairs. “Sean, leave your phone on the coffee table so I can check out the pictures when I’m done, ok?”

“Sure.” He plunked it down and strode after her. Of course, he had his own room here and would for as long as he wanted.

Fifteen minutes later, she wiped the steam off her bathroom mirror and ran a comb through her hair. She frowned at the magazine Samantha must have left on the vanity. Cybil’s face was splashed across the cover, and the caption read, “Cybil Does It Again!”

She supposed the picture was all right. She appeared creative and quirky as she propped her hip against a tree and angled her camera.

Though of several nationalities, her looks definitely made her Irish and Native American bloodlines obvious. Black with cedar highlights, her straight hair was shiny, and her skin tone warm. A light, almost transparent layer of freckles dusted her cheekbones. The studio had caught the sunlight just right so that her amber eyes sparkled more than usual and appeared almost fiery.

She pulled on cut off jean shorts, an oversized t-shirt, then slipped into a pair of comfortable flip-flops before heading downstairs. Jimmy Buffet floated through the house. Sam was helping Mema Angie make frozen margaritas as the two of them danced around the kitchen.

You had to love Friday nights around here.

Shortly after Cybil moved in they had declared it, “Let Loose Night.” Usually, that meant Sean got the evening off, Samantha popped in, and Mema Angie whipped up whatever cocktail she and Sam were in the mood for. On occasion one of their other sisters joined them. Well, at least two of them anyway.

Her eyes drifted to the far wall and lingered. She stared at the portrait of her sisters before turning her attention back to the proofs of her latest shoot.

Mema Angie understood that Cybil was picky about her photographs. She liked to lay them out and analyze them. So although she likely peeked first, she had left all four of them stacked and waiting. Rain fell in heavy sheets, and the storm raged as Cybil propped them side by side.

She crouched as she eyed them one by one.

Large and beautifully framed, each of them depicted a snapshot of nature. She called it her *Dragons of Winter Harbor* collection. These photographs had landed her in several magazines and continued to add to her wealth. She could care less about the money, though. No, her photography, *these*, were what life was all about.

“They’re amazing, Cybil,” Sean murmured, crouching beside her as he stared at them in awe. Barefoot, wearing jeans and a tank top, he was rocking the sexy look with his damp, slightly tousled hair.

“Thanks, but I still feel like there’s one missing,” she whispered as lightning flashed and illuminated them perfectly. Each one was of the clouds over the Atlantic and titled with a single word.

The first was, “Vengeance.” It depicted an angry sea and a deep purple sky at dawn. The clouds and water seemed to overlap, creating the visage of a sweeping dragon that roared toward land.

The second was called, “Soul.” Taken an hour or so before the sun set over calm seas, shades of yellow and gold twirled with the sun and seemed to create a dragon at peace.

The third was labeled, “Fury.” Caught at night, it was an unusual picture that captured the full moon shining over the ocean in the wake of a bad storm. Prisms of blue, a dragon appeared to materialize out of nowhere. Anger burned in its eyes, caught by the reflection of lunar light on the water.

The fourth was, “Pride.” Shades of deep blue and purple, lightning splintered the sky, and the visage of a dragon seemed to appear, unfazed by the weather. Almost as if it defied nature itself.

“Good thing this is a big house with lots of space.” Sean squeezed her hand. “Because these definitely deserve to be shown off.”

“Only if my sisters agree,” she said as she continued to analyze them.

“Of course, we agree,” Sam said gaily as she placed a beer and a margarita between them and flashed her straight, white teeth at Sean in a wolfish grin. “C’mon guys, we’ve only got a few weeks left of summer. Let’s *party!*”

They chuckled and shook their heads as Sam danced around the room before she linked arms with Mema Angie and they swung in circles. When they looked Sean’s way in invitation, his eyes widened, and he pulled Cybil into his arms, declaring, “Already dancing.”

“I hate dancing,” Cybil mumbled and scooped his phone off the table in passing.

“Me too,” he said. “That’s why we’re gonna pretend till they get distracted by the lobster rolls. They’re too damn jolly.”

“Right,” she agreed and clicked into his photo album as he wrapped an arm around her lower back and pulled her a little too close.

“Um,” she began to say but trailed off as she started to scroll through the pictures of the tree.

“Um what?” he murmured.

“Huh?” She shook her head, not sure what they had been talking about as an image became clearer and clearer through the turbulent leaves.

“I’ll be damned,” she whispered and sent it to her email before she clicked on the picture of the Yggdrasil. “Double damn.”

“What?” he said.

Though tempted to pull the pictures up on her widescreen TV, she didn’t want to ruin everyone’s good time so she showed Sean the tree first. “Look at this. Do you see it?”

She watched him closely as he narrowed his eyes at the picture. As she suspected, he appeared troubled. “I’m not sure what I should be—”

“Knock it off, Sean,” she said softly. “I know you see the man’s face and the dragon tattoo on his neck.”

She flipped to the picture of the ash with the Yggdrasil symbol. “And you see that too don’t you?”

It was hard to miss considering the carving glowed.

Sean’s eyes met hers and his voice lowered. “We need to talk.”

“I’m glad to hear you finally admit it.”

“We’re heading out to the garage,” Cybil announced as she pulled Sean after her. “We’ll be right back.”

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” Sam called out with an envious smile.

A few minutes later, Cybil and Sean sat beside each other on a workbench in the garage. After a long swig of beer, he told her things that helped make sense of what she had been experiencing.

“I knew Megan, the woman who lived here before me. She was my best friend.” He sighed. “I forgot she even existed until around the time my realtor contacted me. Then it all came back. Megan, her sisters, everything.”

“Your Scottish realtor.”

“Yes.” His eyes went to hers. “The same man who contacted you.”

“I knew it.” She shook her head, disappointed. “Why not tell me sooner? I thought we were friends.”

“We are, Cybil.” His eyes didn’t quite meet hers. “You know how much I care about you.”

“Okay, then tell me what’s going on,” she said. “And I’ll tell you why you think you have feelings for me.”

His brows shot up in surprise. “I don’t have—”

“Yes you do, and we both know it.” She held his hand. “And that’s fine...and explainable. But I need answers first, okay?”

He seemed a little thrown but continued nonetheless.

“Yeah, okay.” He shot her a look. “You remind me of Megan sometimes. She was assertive too.”

“It’s the only way to be,” she said. “Now tell me what’s going on.”

"It's hard to understand. To piece together." He clenched his jaw. "But after the Scotsman came, I started to remember things. Megan, Veronica...and Amber. How much she had meant to me. The only reasonable explanation I can come up with is that someone must've wiped my memory."

Sean pulled out his wallet and handed her a picture. "This is them. All three sisters." He looked at her with a worried, almost sad expression before he pointed out who each one was. "But now they're gone."

"Where?" she murmured, eying the attractive women before she looked at him. "Where'd they go, Sean?"

He took another long swig of beer. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

She set aside her drink. "Try me."

So he told her a fantastical story. How each sister had vanished from Winter Harbor. He told her about Rune staves and stones with Viking symbols that apparently transported them back in time to ninth-century Scandinavia.

"Once all my memories returned, I realized the last time I saw Amber was in February of 2015." He took another swig of beer. "So she's been gone for eighteen months."

Cybil squeezed his hand and kept her voice soft. "You really cared about her, didn't you?"

"I did," he said with a touch of sadness. "She must've used some sort of magic to let me down easy though because I've been drawn to Julie for a while now."

"Yet you two haven't gotten together," Cybil said.

"Not really." He took the picture back and stared at it. "Something's just not clicking. Not like with Amber."

"Are you still in love with Amber?"

"In love?" He shook his head. "No...I don't think so. I'm not sure I ever was."

"You were." Cybil tapped the picture. "But she's not the love of your life. Trust me. There's someone else out there for you."

"You sound convinced." Sean's brows drew together as he looked at her. "Care to share?"

"She's coming. Soon. And she's not Julie." Cybil braced her hands on the edge of the bench. Though wary of telling him too much, he could clearly handle it based on what he'd just divulged. "You think you're attracted to me because I'm connected to her somehow. A link."

Her eyes met his and she took a deep breath before continuing. "Sean, I'm a prophet. I see or sense things before they happen."

He eyed her for a long moment before he said, "Okay." Then he nodded and came clean. "Your lawyer's real name is Grant MacLomain, or Grant Hamilton depending on who you ask. For whatever reason, he wanted you and your sisters to move here. He never said why just that it was important. When the ash tree started growing, and I became familiar with your photography, I figured something was up. After seeing that Yggdrasill carved into the root today, I'm sure of it."

"So the tree's fairly new," she whispered.

"Yup." His gaze held hers. "It started growing a few months after I bought the house. So maybe a year and a half ago."

"Yet it looks ancient."

"That's right."

Cybil considered him for a few moments, not sure she wanted an answer. "And somehow all of this is connected to my dragon pictures?"

"It makes sense," Sean polished off his beer, "considering the men Megan and her sisters traveled back in time to be with were dragon-shifters."

A shiver of awareness rippled through her. One she had felt again and again since moving here. So now she knew for certain that the warnings she'd gotten in her dreams from the man beneath the tree were true. She needed to keep her sisters away. She needed to keep them safe.

But how was she supposed to do that?

After all, they were of dragon blood too.

All of them except for her.

"You've got that same haunted look in your eyes that you get when you're staring at the house," Sean murmured. "Now I'm starting to understand why." He snorted. "Hell, you're a prophet. I have to say, I never saw that one coming."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner." She shook her head. "I'm sure you can understand, it's just not something I tell people."

"Not even your sisters?"

"Nope. Only my dad knew." Cybil decided it was best to share everything regardless how difficult. "He's also the only other person who knew that my sisters are dragon-shifters." She released a shaky sigh. "Heck, *they* don't even know what they are. Not yet anyway. Hopefully never."

"No shit," he said as surprise then compassion lit his eyes. He wrapped an arm around her shoulder. "I'm glad you at least had your dad to share all this with."

Cybil merely nodded and left it at that. She had been close to her father and still felt the pangs of his loss.

Evidently sensing her need to move on, he said, "So your sisters are dragon shifters and don't even know it." He shook his head. "That's incredible."

"Tell me about it." She was grateful she finally had another person to share with. "Try being the only one holding everything together over the years. My biggest task was trying to keep them from thinking they were going crazy."

He looked at her oddly. "So I take it they've almost shifted?"

"They came close," she said. "But something always keeps it from happening."

"What does that mean?" he asked. "They came close?"

"It doesn't matter."

"But I'm interested."

"Really?" She eyed him. "Why?"

"Outside of the fact that anyone would be..." There was a hint of emotion in his voice. "I'd kinda like to know more about who Amber ended up with...because Kol was half dragon."

"You know his name," she said softly.

"Yeah, I know his name."

"All right." Cybil squeezed his hand again. "Sometimes their skin glistened unnaturally if they got too worked up. Other times, their eyes brightened when they shouldn't have. Almost catlike for a second or two."

His brows shot up. "Really?"

"Really."

She was about to say more when the door burst open. Samantha peeked her head in, her eyes expectant before she locked on them and frowned. "Darn, I was hoping to catch you two in action."

"No party to be found here," Cybil quipped and grinned.

Sam rolled her eyes. "My party planning will likely come to a grinding halt considering Lauren just showed up. Get in here before I shoot her. *Gawd* is she *dull*."

"Yeah, yeah. Get back in there," Cybil said. "I'm coming."

"You better be," Sam shot before she vanished.

"She's hard on Lauren," Sean said.

"Always has been." Cybil took a few sips from her margarita. "But believe it or not the party planner and the botanist really do love each other."

"How is Samantha doing with her new business?"

"Awesome, actually. She's a natural." Cybil grinned as she stood. "She's doing so well she'll be competing on Shark Tank."

Sean laughed. "You're shitting me."

"Nope." Cybil laughed as well. "Apparently the idea of hosting divorce and break-up parties and all it entails is becoming a big hit."

"Close one door and open another, eh?"

"You bet." She pulled him after her. "Let's go head off a civil war before it begins."

"Hey." Sean stopped her. "Are we okay? Have we overwhelmed each other with too much information?"

She faced him. "What do you think?"

"I think I'm good." He squeezed her hand and looked a little deeper into her eyes. "I also think I'll believe the whole I'm-meant-for-another-girl when I see it."

She quirked the corner of her mouth. "Well, at least you're not focusing on the whole I'm-a-prophet thing."

He grinned. "Just another bump in the road."

"So I'm a bump."

"You're something," he said softly.

Their eyes held for a long moment. In another life, one not dictated by a higher power, she would have enjoyed falling in love with a guy like Sean. But something else was happening. Something she had no control over.

Change.

The man beneath the tree flashed through her mind.

All she had seen of him so far were snippets and shadows. Yet tonight as she looked at the leaves in the picture, she finally saw a smidgen more. His pale blue eyes. New angles of his face. More dimensions.

Then there were his emotions.

Her emotions.

His need to fight their connection was as strong as hers.

Yet there was more...she had heard it whisper through her mind when she looked at the Yggdrasil.

Her Viking finally had a name.

Heidrek Sigdir.

Chapter Two



“**F**EELING *HOT, HOT, hot*,” Samantha sang as she lounged with her legs bent over the backside of the couch and her butt wiggling in time to the music. Her face hung upside down over the edge of the seat, giving everyone an ample view of her cleavage.

“You are being indecent, Samantha,” Lauren said, her eyes skirting to Sean as she nibbled on her lobster roll from the opposite couch.

Sam chuckled. “I’m being *human*, Ms. Stiff.” She grinned. “Sign your damn divorce papers already and try it out. It’s not half bad.”

“She’s right.” Mema Angie smiled at Sam. “You are being indecent.” But then she swung around until she was upside down in the same position looking at Lauren. “But it’s quite fun. You should try it, dear.”

Appalled, Lauren shook her head and continued studying her cell phone as if it offered an escape from all the horror. Sean, not seeming to notice them, lounged back with a full stomach and worked on another beer as he watched a Patriot’s pre-season game.

Cybil eyed Lauren discreetly while she looked at Heidrek in the picture of the ash tree. Ever the politician’s wife, her sister wore business slacks and a tasteful shirt buttoned up to the neck. Remarkably beautiful, petite and barely pushing five-foot-two, her blond hair was tied back tightly.

Sam pulled her temples back and eyed Lauren. “You know your face is going to rip right off if you keep wearing your hair like that.”

“Samantha,” Mema Angie chastised.

“What?” Sam did a backward somersault off the couch until she sat cross-legged in front of Lauren. “I’m serious.” She tapped Lauren’s knee and gestured toward the glass of wine in her sister’s hand. “Take a real sip. Not a pretend one.”

“I am not pretending,” Lauren said crisply, not bothering to look at Sam.

So Samantha shimmied closer, propped her elbows on either side of Lauren and offered her best puppy dog eyes. “*Pa-lease*.”

“No.”

“Please.”

“Leave me alone.”

Sam pouted and squeezed Lauren’s knee, her number one tickle spot. “Please.”

Lauren fought a smile and pushed Sam’s hand away. “No. I am enjoying my wine at the current rate in which I’m drinking it, thank you.”

“Ugh.” Sam rolled her head on her neck then huffed, “Fine,” before she sprang to her feet, plunked down on Sean’s lap and purred in his ear, “How ‘bout you? Want another beer?”

He wrapped his arm around her waist and nodded absently as he watched the game.

“Oh, come on.” She whacked his chest. “Everyone needs to stop being so boring.”

“Darling, I’m not boring in the least,” Mema Angie declared, still upside down.

“You’re right, you’re not.” Sam grinned and started tickling Sean. “And nobody else needs to be either.”

He didn't say a word but growled in her ear and tickled her to the point of distraction before he tossed her on the opposite couch and headed for the kitchen.

Cybil smiled. Sam finally seemed to be free of her ex-husband and doing well for herself. Yet she sometimes wondered how genuine it all was.

They had been high school sweethearts. For all intents and purposes, Rick had been the love of Samantha's life. Was it so easy to move past that? She had no idea because she couldn't relate. But she did sense a rocky future for her lighthearted, flirtatious sister. One weighed down not by the future but by the past.

Her eyes went to Lauren, a sister who faced the opposite of Samantha's plight. She would be weighed down by the future, and things of her past would almost seem light of heart though they were stifling.

Her eyes drifted to her photographs.

What did *they* mean?

Because they were part of this somehow.

Vengeance. Soul. Fury. Pride.

The previous storm had abated, but a new one was rolling in, its distant thunder rumbling through her thoughts as her eyes returned to Heidrek. Yet another man she wasn't allowed to possess. Because if one thing remained true, love didn't belong in a prophet's life. It could never be real. Not when you constantly saw other people's futures. More so, when you saw inside their hearts.

And no heart was one hundred percent devoted.

At least not to her.

Having long ago accepted that, she had embraced protecting and steering her sisters in the right direction. The safest course she could find based on what she knew about them. And they were all so very different. It was a life full of predictable unpredictability. That was the best way she could put it. She lived for them because though they didn't know it, they were unstable, teetering on the edge of something they did not understand.

Except the most repressed one.

Her eyes went to Lauren. The only sister who almost shifted entirely but didn't remember it. But she would. They all would.

Unless she and Heidrek found a way to stop it.

Because somehow they were the key.

Desperate for space and time to think, she stood and stretched. "I'm off to bed everyone." She leaned over and looked at Mema Angie. "Thanks for the delicious lobster rolls. See you in the morning?"

"Probably not." Mema Angie sat up and smiled. "Sleep well, darling."

Cybil nodded and waved at everyone. "Catch ya in the A.M."

Everyone said their goodnights as she climbed the stairs. Thankfully, there was a deck off her bedroom. One she utilized despite the storm. Lightning crisscrossed the sky, illuminating the choppy ocean. Elbows braced on the railing, she stared at the tree, her thoughts still on Heidrek. Some might say he haunted her, but she didn't quite look at it like that. Not when he was trying to keep her away.

Not when he was somehow trying to protect her and her family.

She thought of those that might be *his* family. Kol was a relative. She closed her eyes and focused on the name and let it lead her to others. Kol's brothers. Naðr Véurr...a king. Raknar.

The men who had ended up with Amber's sisters. Her thoughts chased them until they focused on a young blond boy with a stutter and deep sadness. He grew, changed, became a man.

Heidrek.

Her eyes snapped open, and she focused on the tree again. He had become something unexpected. What he became changed everything. It would make him a king.

The king.

Someone so important that it drew attention. She blinked and shook her head as thunder crashed and rain fell harder. No, he drew attention by *his* actions. He brought trouble to his people...to his family.

That's what he had been trying to tell her all along.

Stay away.

Stay safe.

And she would. He needed to know that.

Cybil didn't realize what she was doing until she was down the stairs off her deck and heading for the tree. The wind was strong, and the rain cold but nothing fazed her. She needed to be beneath the ash.

She needed to understand.

Hands braced against the cool bark, she stared up but saw nothing beyond flashes of lightning. Yet she felt something. A slight vibration that had nothing to do with the endless thunder. Her eyes dropped to her feet. To the root.

The Yggdrasill carving glowed again.

"Stay away," whispered close to her ear.

Her eyes shot to the right, and her breath caught.

There he was. Gorgeous. Masculine. Intense.

Yet ghostly.

At least a foot taller than her, he had dirty blond hair, stubble on his strong jaw and the same, piercing blue eyes she had seen in the photo. He wore a red tunic and brown fur over his broad shoulders.

Her eyes fell to the bear pendant hanging around his neck. "You use that to connect us and protect me. Does that mean keeping my family and me from traveling to you and yours?" she whispered as she shook her head and met his eyes again. "Because it won't. It isn't working."

He started to talk but stopped, confusion in his eyes. "It should only connect us. Protect you. Nothing more..." His eyes roamed her face before they went to the house. "Please. You must stay away for the safety of your kin."

Cybil was caught off guard by the flicker of desire in his eyes when his gaze returned to her. More so, by her sharp response to it. She frowned and shook her head. "I'm trying." She attempted to tear her gaze from his but couldn't. "Tell me what to do."

"Run from here. Get away from this tree." She sensed that he wanted to reach out but didn't. "If you stay, I cannot stop this."

"But you led me here," she whispered, desperate to understand. "Didn't you?"

His eyes roamed her face again or at least she thought they did as he started to fragment. "I...do not know."

"Heidrek?"

She sensed his surprise that she knew his name. Then he shocked her as well when he whispered her name before vanishing altogether.

"Oh no," she murmured. "Don't go. Please don't go."

Despite the tree cover, rain poured on her face, splashing down through the leaves as she walked around the trunk, searching for him. But he was gone, and she knew better than to get anxious over it. Not like the countless nights when she awoke with her heart pounding and the sheets twisted around her ankles.

Still, whatever had just happened left her feeling hollow and empty in a way she couldn't quite explain. Numb, she found her way to bed but didn't bother getting out of her wet clothes as she lay down and stared at the ceiling.

What she felt now was the polar opposite of excitement. The oxymoron to the thrill she endlessly sought. An aching absence in her soul that made no sense. She must have drifted off at some point because the next thing she heard was the shrill of Sam's voice.

"Kowabunga!" her sister cried before cannonballing onto her bed.

"For crying out loud," Cybil complained and buried herself further beneath her comforter. "Go away."

"Hell no." Sam reached under the blankets and put something greasy beneath her nose. "Just *smell* that, sister."

"Oh, ew." Cybil couldn't help but smile as she shimmied toward the opposite side of her California King bed. "Was that bacon you almost accosted me with?"

"Sure was." Sam whipped the blankets away and sprung to her feet, planting one foot on either side of Cybil before she could escape. "Hickory Smoked to be exact."

She might be eager to be alone right now but looking up at her sister with her hands on her hips and a chunk of bacon hanging out of the corner of her mouth had her chuckling. "You know you're a bonafide lunatic, right?"

"Don't talk about boning and licking," Sam said and pushed the bacon into her mouth as she bounced once. "Because I got neither from Sean last night no matter how hard I tried."

"Boning?" Cybil mouthed. "Who even uses that word?" She shook her head. "And that was lunatic not lick. Big difference."

"Whatever. I heard an 'ic' sound." Sam bit her lower lip, sultry like. "And *lick* is one of my favorite words." She winked. "When it comes to certain things."

Cheered considerably by Sam's unfailing quirkiness, Cybil swiped her leg and caught her sister's ankle.

Samantha yelped and fell down beside her, bacon still trapped securely between her teeth as she laughed. "No fair, Black Belt!"

Cybil ignored her reference to being a black belt and rolled onto her side, still grinning. She loved all her sisters, but Sam would always be her favorite even if she didn't feel the same. No, Sam's closest sister would always be Lauren. Not that she knew it yet.

"Oooo...." Sam narrowed her eyes and pressed her thumb and forefinger between Cybil's eyebrows then smoothed her fingers out. "There you go again analyzing and over thinking God knows what. You're making wrinkles."

Cybil only meant to chuckle but outright laughed as Sam tried to smooth out the lines between her eyes. "I'm only getting older. Wrinkles are gonna happen one of these days."

"Only if you let them." Sam's eyes met hers. "Stop being so intense and re-direct the road-map of your life and face." She smoothed her expression. "See, like this. Feel the mojo of the universe and relax."

Cybil snorted. "Did you seriously just say that?"

"Shit, I think I did." Sam scrunched her nose then sat up. "Ignore." Then she jumped over Cybil, landed on the floor, grabbed her hand and started yanking. "Come have breakfast. Lauren

and Sean are down there together, and you know how much fun that is. Zero conversation. Dull. Dull. Dull.” Sam yanked again. “Come save me.”

“You’re acting like a teenager,” Cybil said as she crawled out of bed and put on her slippers.

“Well, yeah.” Sam tapped her foot, hands on her hips. “I had to act like a proper wife for nearly a decade. Reverting back to my youth while I’m on vacation sounds like an awesome idea.”

She had a good point. And coming here was a vacation for all of her sisters seeing how Cybil was the only one who had decided to actually stay.

Well, the sisters who *were* willing to visit that is.

Because one was stubbornly estranged.

“Hey, Sis?” Cybil said.

Sam stopped at the door. “Yeah?”

“The forecast says it’s going to be rough out there today.” She grinned. “You wanna go Jet Skiing?”

Like always when she asked one of her sisters to live on the edge with her, Cybil anxiously awaited an answer. Would they? Or would they say no and she’d feel that same old sinking sensation?

On average, she took risks that made no sense. And typically she wanted at least one of them with her no matter how dire the circumstances. And that wasn’t good. Or so others might think because she was putting them in harm’s way.

But she knew she wasn’t.

Not only did she have the gift of foresight but they could survive things no mortal could. It was as if a part of her wanted to be like them. To connect. Understand them on a deeper level even though they didn’t know what they *truly* were. It was a lonely place she had lived in for far too long.

“Sure, count me in,” Sam responded.

They shouldn’t be out on the water today. Sean would have a conniption.

“Sis? You coming?”

Her eyes snapped to Sam, and she mustered a smile. “Yup, I’ll be right down.”

Worry flickered through her sister’s eyes. “You sure?”

Cybil swallowed and nodded. “Yes.” She waved her away. “Get outta here.”

Sam eyed her for a moment before she grinned and said, “Alright, alright,” over her shoulder and headed down the hallway.

Head braced in her hands, Cybil did what she had done so many times before. She reminded herself that she was doing the right thing by not telling her sisters what they were. That she was keeping them safe even as she risked their lives with her stunts.

She slid the bedside table drawer open, reached to the back and pulled out a picture. Her dad stood smiling with her and her four sisters when they were little...taken the very day she realized they weren’t normal. Samantha, Lauren, Shannon and Erica.

Her eyes stung as she looked at them. It was a bitter pill to swallow for a girl barely twelve years old to know her sisters were different. So she couldn’t imagine how they would have taken it since they were even younger. All of them had suffered in one way or another because she hadn’t been honest. But how could she even begin to tell them what she was? What *they* were?

It had been impossible at twelve and only became more difficult over the years as she explained away things they didn’t understand. She conveniently set aside the fact that half the time she did not entirely understand what *she* was.

They came first.

They always had and always would.

Now that they owned this house, she continued to hope they would become as close as they once were.

“Let’s go, sleepy head,” Sam called from the bottom of the stairs. “Or I’ll eat all the waffles!”

Cybil smiled, clipped her hair up and plodded downstairs. As expected, Sean and Lauren were in their own corners. Lauren was on the couch with a book, and Sean sat at the kitchen island leafing through paperwork.

“Look at you, Sean.” She grinned in passing. “Running your own business.”

He grunted without looking up.

Cybil poured some coffee then eyed the thick waffles on the griddle. “They look good, Sam.”

“I know right. Pure perfection.” Sam glanced between Sean and Lauren then rolled her eyes. “And not appreciated until now.”

“Life’s a bitch,” she said before Sam plunked a chunk of waffle on Cybil’s tongue.

“Oh, so good,” Cybil groaned with enough sensual emphasis to gain Sean’s attention.

The corner of his mouth hitched up as his eyes met hers. “You’re bad.”

She winked. “On occasion.”

“You are supposed to set a good example for Samantha, Cybil,” Lauren reminded. Dressed in a business suit, her hair was tied back tight again.

Cybil’s eyes met Sam’s as her sister mouthed, “An example?”

Cybil perked her brows and shook her head, whispering, “Don’t do it, Sam. She can’t handle—”

Too late. Sam took a waffle, smothered it in syrup and headed Lauren’s way.

Her little sister’s eyes grew wide as Sam approached. “What are you doing?”

“Serving you breakfast.”

“No, you are not.”

“Yeah I am.”

Lauren stood and smoothed her crème colored pant suit. “I am married to the State’s Attorney and well past the age of food fights.”

“Not for much longer.” Sam strode her way. “And get off your high horse. I was married to a governor.”

Lauren eyed the waffle. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“I would.” Sam sprinted after her.

Lauren whipped her high heels aside and took off.

“Just stay away from my pictures,” Cybil called before she realized they weren’t propped up against the wall anymore.

“Mema Angie wanted them hung before she left,” Sean informed. “So I helped.”

“Ah.” That didn’t surprise her. Angie had done that with other new portraits. The woman had an uncanny eye for lighting so she trusted they were hung in the most favorable places around the house.

“No,” Lauren protested as she raced past the island and back into the living room.

Cybil grinned as she watched them. Sam might drive Lauren crazy, but she was the one who could always break through her protective shell. A shell that seriously needed to be shattered. Right now.

Married at twenty-one to a man over a decade older, Lauren had become his stalwart supporter as he navigated the political world. She was the pretty little trophy on his arm as he repeatedly cheated on her. Not that Lauren would admit as much. Oh no, the rumors were always wrong.

Until they weren't.

Unfortunately, now that Lauren had helped him get where he needed to be, he was moving on. And everyone knew he was moving on with his mistress, a woman half his age.

But, God forbid her sister would acknowledge it.

Lauren showed no signs of sadness and pretended everything was fine even though she'd been served divorce papers nearly six months ago. All was well in her perfect self-delusional bubble. And though Cybil and Sam had tried to talk to her about it, she remained closed off.

The whole thing drove Samantha to distraction.

Sam had lived a similar life with Rick except she declared war when she learned he was cheating. He'd been served divorce papers within weeks. And as a little added bonus she strung several of his most expensive business suits up at prime locations in their city, each ruined and sporting a note about what a douche he was.

"This is a four-hundred dollar shirt," Lauren declared as Sam finally caught up to her and the waffle became a weapon.

Cybil tuned them out as she stared at the pictures she had sent from Sean's phone to hers. Voice soft, she said, "So what does everything we talked about last night have to do with Erin and her friend Jackie?"

Sean's eyes met hers. "I have no idea. Grant was pretty vague."

"You dealt with him before, didn't you?"

Sean eyed her for a long moment before he nodded. "Yeah, he was the lawyer who made sure I got this house after Megan vanished."

"Hmm," she murmured. "Interesting."

How was Scotland and Scandinavia interrelated in all of this? Because she knew without a doubt that they were.

When the doorbell rang, her eyes met Sean's. "Expecting someone?"

He shook his head. "Nope."

A delivery man greeted her with a package she had to sign for. Though lightweight, it was large and rectangular. She knew right away it was a picture.

By the time she made it to the living room, Lauren had already retired upstairs in a huff, a sore loser in the war of the waffles. Pleased to have conquered, Sam wore a wide smile as she flopped down on the couch, winded.

"What's that, Sis?" she asked.

"I have no idea," Cybil murmured. A little rush spiked through her as she tore off the wrapping. She hadn't known this was coming. There was no sense of foresight at all.

When she finally saw what it was, she froze.

How was this possible?

"Sean," she whispered, dumbfounded. "Did you do this?"

Because he was the only one who could have.

He crouched beside her and held her elbow in support. "No."

Expensively framed in gilded gold, it was the picture she had taken of the ash tree. The one that made Heidrek's face clear.

It was astounding.

Unimaginably striking.

“Look.” Sean pointed to the corner where an artist would usually put their signature. While her elegantly curved “C” for Cybil was there so was something else.

The Yggdrasill symbol.

As if burned into the picture, it almost appeared to be on fire.

“Oh, wow, Cyb,” Sam murmured, standing over her shoulder. “You’ve done some amazing work but this...there aren’t words. It’s amazing...he’s amazing...*gorgeous*.”

Cybil was speechless as Samantha continued.

“And it’s not a dragon this time except for the tat on his neck,” she whispered. “Very cool way to tie it in with the rest of them.”

Cybil recalled how certain she felt the night before that a picture had been missing.

And now this.

“But how? Nobody else saw the picture.” Her eyes went to Sean. “Did you share it with anyone?”

“You know I didn’t.” He frowned. “I wouldn’t.”

“Then I don’t understand.”

He shook his head and pulled her up. “Eat breakfast then we’ll figure this out.”

But they both knew they wouldn’t.

Something else entirely was at work here.

Cybil rubbed her forehead, stared at the picture and whispered, “I’m not hungry.”

“Still,” Sam said, a little less chipper than usual, likely sensing something was seriously off. “You’ve gotta eat.”

“No.” Cybil shook her head and backed away from the picture, cursing the unexpected lust that tore through her as she continued to stare at it...at *him*. “I need to get away from it.” She took another step back. “Sean, please...take it away!”

“Okay. Calm down.” Sean started down the hallway with the picture. “I’ll put it in the basement.”

Cybil bit her lip to keep from calling him back, because every fiber of her being wanted to scream, “Don’t take it! Bring it back!” But for her sake and everyone else’s she remained silent.

Cybil cursed under her breath, baffled by her emotions. She’d had no sense of forewarning. And although she should like the lack of control, she didn’t.

This was unsafe for her sisters.

All of it.

“Where are you going, Cyb?” Sam asked as she headed upstairs. “Are we going Jet Skiing soon?”

“Not right now. I’m taking a nap.”

A total lie. She needed to take back control. The ocean was rough and the skies turbulent, but she sensed nothing but smooth sailing. Control over a fate she had less than twelve hours before wanted to escape. Not now. She climbed into her bathing suit, tied her hair into a ponytail and headed outside onto her bedroom deck.

Moving quickly because she knew Sean would be out as soon as he spied her, she removed the cover from one of the Jet Skis, threw on a life vest to stay off the coast guard’s radar and headed out.

As she navigated the heavier swells closer to shore, she slowly relaxed as reality seemed to right itself. *This* made sense. Risk without risk. Not all that fun but at least it wasn’t what that

picture offered. Danger. A threat not toward her but her sisters. Something she couldn't control or navigate.

Once she got beyond the initial waves, she gunned the Jet Ski and raced out into Frenchman Bay. She could already hear Sean cursing because the water was pretty wild. The swells higher than usual.

But there was no ash tree out here. No Yggdrasill.

And definitely no Heidrek.

The wind whipped, and black clouds rolled across the sky as she laughed and crested wave after wave. She tilted her head back and grinned when thunder rumbled across the sky.

A few minutes out, she tackled an especially high wave then turned sharply when she reached the bottom. Water shot into the sky as her Jet Ski skidded, giving her an extra thrill. While she intended to cruise the coastline she couldn't help but play. The swells were higher than ever, and her adrenaline was rushing.

It felt pretty damn good.

Freeing.

Gunning the engine, Cybil chased the swells inland. She loved the rush of riding a wave, jumping then chasing the next. Wind whipped and salt caked her skin as she narrowed her eyes and laughed.

Lightning flashed as she raced after the next wave. That's when she saw Sean heading her way in the cigarette boat. Damn it. He was coming to get her. While tempted to bank a hard right to lose him, he would chase her down. And though she knew nothing would happen to him, she still didn't want him out here.

So she kept flying inland, jumping and riding the waves. Her intention was to cruise by him, wave and smile.

And she did.

Or at least she thought so.

Maybe a thousand yards out, he was closing in. The dock was within sight.

The ash tree.

Yet something changed when her eyes locked on it.

Despite the whipping wind and the ocean spray, it almost seemed to illuminate as if sunlight hit it. But that couldn't be because it was so overcast. Yet the tree glowed.

A split second later, everything changed.

She wasn't racing toward shore but through the air.

Sean and the boat vanished. So did her Jet Ski and life vest. Still racing forward, she catapulted, tumbling over and over until she crashed into the water. Stunned, she closed her mouth and relaxed her body. Even though she tried to stop herself, she rolled beneath the water for several long moments before she surfaced.

All she could see at first were flashes of light as she tried to regain her bearings.

Then she saw it.

A long, unfamiliar dock.

A man stood at the end of it with his arms crossed over his chest and anger in his eyes as he watched her.

Then she saw more.

Endless docks.

Viking longships.

Towering mountains.

Oh no.

She was tugged under by a wave. When she surfaced, he was still there watching her. Sizing her up. She just knew it. What was going on? Who was he? She tried to swim but couldn't gain ground. Hell. She was caught in a riptide.

One far too close to shore and heavier waves.

She went under again then started rolling.

Determined to fight this, she held her breath, waited until the roll let her go, turned sideways and started swimming underwater. She needed to work with the water, not fight it. So that's what she did, over and over again as she made her way toward shore. She ignored her confusing surroundings and focused on survival.

A need to survive she had not been forewarned about.

Yet she knew what had happened. Somehow, Cybil had done the opposite of what she and Heidrek wanted.

She was no longer in her own era.

But she couldn't process that right now. All she could do was work toward staying alive. So she rolled and tumbled and swam until she was swept up into a strong set of arms.

She knew exactly who it was.

The man who had allowed her to struggle all this time.

Exhausted, eyes bleary from the salt water, she mumbled, "Who are you?"

His deep voice rumbled as he strode forward and said words she knew weren't good.

"I am Matthew Sigdir, first born son of Raknar 'The Hunter' and Veronica," he declared. "And I claim you as mine."

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About the Author



Sky Purington is the bestselling author of over thirty novels and several novellas. A New Englander born and bred who recently moved to Virginia, Sky was raised hearing stories of folklore, myth, and legend. When combined with a love for nature, romance, and time-travel, elements from the stories of her youth found release in her books.

Purington loves to hear from readers and can be contacted at Sky@SkyPurington.com. Interested in keeping up with Sky's latest news and releases? Either visit Sky's website, www.SkyPurington.com, sign up for her quarterly [newsletter](#), or sign up for personalized text message alerts. Simply text 'skypurington' (no quotes, one word, lowercase) to 74121 or visit Sky's [Sign-up Page](#). Texts will ONLY be sent when there is a new book release. Readers can easily opt out at any time.

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