



*Chapter One from  
Ciara Gold's  
On Timeless Wings of Gold*

*Dallas, Texas 2024*

"Edward!"

Her ex husband turned, drew in a deep breath, and snarled as if he had a patent on mortality. The least he could do was show some fear.

The classic Derringer remake fit in Angel Cashion's hand as if made for her. She lifted the weapon, sighted, and pulled the trigger.

The startled surprise on his face lasted only seconds before he fell to his death. She smiled, loving the sudden freedom. "Have a nice death, sucker."

"Mommy?"

Her daughter's voice called from the other room and propelled her into a frenzy of action. Rushing, she swept from the bedroom to intercept the two-year-old before Chloe saw Daddy. The child flew into her waiting arms with a giggle and a sloppy kiss. Angel laughed. "You're mine, now, baby. All mine." *Edward can't hurt us anymore.*

"Mine." Chloe clapped and giggled.

"That's right. Come on. We've got to get out of here so we can be together forever. You'd like that, right?"

Black ringlets bobbed about her cherub face. "Go." She pointed to the door.

Angel smiled. The cosmos had played right into her plan. A trip back in time would provide the perfect escape. No one would find them. She tweaked Chloe's

nose before hefting the girl into her arms. Together, they walked outside into a night made perfect by cooperating phenomena. As she approached her Harley, a rush of lights swept them into a vortex of fluid motion. Where she and Chloe would land remained a mystery, but she embraced the portal and clutched Chloe tighter to her breast.

The lights died. "Chloe?"

"Chloe!"

Total darkness flooded her mind. The child was gone.

"Angel." A persistent voice broke through her panic. "Angel, time's up."

She opened her eyes and clutched her breast, disoriented. "Wilbur?"

"None other. Surely you weren't expecting a knight in shining armor or a sexy pirate?" He bent to unhook wires from the virtual reality computer.

"Hardly."

"So – how did the new time-travel sequence work for you?"

She pressed her eyelids together and ran her tongue against dry lips. "I could use some water."

"Sure. Coming right up. Guess murder is laborious work."

Her eyes snapped open, and she glared at his retreating back. "What are you talking about? You're not supposed to eavesdrop into other people's VR trips."

He returned with a bottled water. "You're very vocal when you're under."

She slowly sat up and took the refreshment he offered. "Too bad I could never kill my ex for real, but if anyone deserved to die, it'd be him." She lifted her gaze to his. "Good thing you're sworn to secrecy. As for the time-travel, I never made it that far. I had just entered the portal when you pulled the plug."

"Rules. I can't allow you to go over limit. There've been a few cases of VR

lapse, so right now, the whole industry is under a microscope.”

“VR lapse?” She absently noted the large screen on the wall, the panel of wires and controls to her right. On her hands, she wore a pair of VR gloves with wires attached and a metal crash bracelet.

Wilbur lifted the helmet from her head. “Yeah, that’s when a person lapses into a VR trip without being hooked to the rig. Without a crash bracelet, the victim can be under for days. They even had one case where a lady was in her VR trip for over a week. When her family found her, they took her to the ER for treatment as she was pretty much comatose.”

A shiver cascaded down Angel’s spine. Maybe she should back off her sessions, but visualizing and participating in Edward’s demise was a much needed stress release. Giving up the chance to be with Chloe even if only during VR was not an option. Damn Edward for taking their daughter from her.

Wilbur punched the button, and her chair returned to an upright position. Angel handed him the crash bracelet. “Thanks.”

“My pleasure.” He held out a hand to help her from the chair. “In fact, I’ve got a coupon. The next trip is on the house.”

She laughed. “I just had a sudden vision of being on top of the roof and giving Edward...”

Wilbur held up a hand. “I do not want to hear about your murder plans.” The effeminate attendant put away the VR gear and opened the door. “Girlfriend, you need some serious help. Why don’t you rat out your ex to the police?”

Angel shook her head. “Edward has too many friends in high places.”

Besides, while she considered Wilbur a friend of sorts, she wasn’t inclined to divulge any more than he already knew. Luckily, the sandy haired man kept secrets

well, or she'd be obliged to find a different VR house.

After paying for her session, she headed for work. The thirty-minute drive atop T-bone, her father's classic black Heritage Springer Softail, helped clear her head. Wilbur had a point. Something had to be done soon, or Edward's influence would turn Chloe into a monster just like him. And to think she once considered herself in love with that man.

She whipped into the large bay and parked. Several of the other mechanics had beat her there and had already started work on various bikes. She hung her helmet on the backrest and went to the break room to put on a pair of coveralls. Dressed and ready for work, she sauntered to the office. "Hey Joe, hand me a fun one to dive into."

Joe gave her one of his famous you'll-take-what-I-give-you looks and slapped a clipboard into her palm without further comment. The repair order offered no challenge, but work was work. She meandered through the cluttered garage, avoiding the occasional orphaned tool and empty oil cans before finding the Kawasaki listed. An hour later, she finished the routine maintenance on the Ninja and went to work on a 1987 Electra Glide Sport. Her father, the Hammerhead would have been proud of the way she handled individual machines, as if each were a precious child in need of a delicate touch.

"Hey Angel, you finished with that green classic yet?"

"Teal, not green." Angel crouched next to the almost pristine bike and popped the carburetor back into the rubber sleeve. Ignoring the bead of sweat that rolled down her rib cage, she glanced at her boss. "You can't rush the master, Doughboy."

"Well, someone's here for the old gal, so you might wanna rethink the rush

job.”

“Ooo, honey. Quickies just don’t do it for me.”

Ken Reinberg, or Doughboy as he’d been nicknamed, wiped his hands on a greasy towel. “I wouldn’t know.”

She sat on the hard concrete and grappled with the throttle cable. The smell of gasoline and motor oil grew stronger. “Only because your new lady love would ...” She scrunched her nose and gritted her teeth when the cable sprang loose.

Darn spring. Carburetors and fuel injectors she could fix in her sleep, but pulling that screwy spring on the cable frustrated her every time. “Damn. Busted another fingernail.”

“You don’t have fingernails to bust. Now quit horsing around and get that Harley put back together. Crenshaw ain’t gonna wait around forever.”

“Yes, sir.” She wiggled her brows and sneered at the obese man. Who did he think he was anyway? One day when she no longer owed every creditor in sight, she’d have a place just like this one, and once she was on her feet again, she’d be able to get Chloe back. “Got anything else to say before I have you fired?”

“Yeah, smart ass.” He popped the towel at her, indicating he wasn’t particularly fond of her ongoing joke of owning the shop and becoming his boss. “You gonna break to watch that eclipse?”

“Got too much work to do. You watch and give me the full report when it’s over.”

“But you’ll be missing history in the making.” He rocked back on squeaky boots that had seen better days.

“I got all the history making I need right here.” She pulled back the spring for the fifth time, held her breath, and popped the throttle cable back into place. A

squeal left her lips.

"Does this mean you have my boss' Harley fixed?" Sank Crenshaw wound his way between bikes in various stages of repair.

"She'd better. She ate up enough overtime doing it," Doughboy groused before strutting off to give some other sucker grief.

She rolled her eyes at his retreating back then quirked a smile at the newcomer. "You're early."

"I didn't any have clients so thought I'd stop by." Sank peered down at her, his exercise clothes stretched tight against sinewy muscles. "So, is it done?"

"I need to test drive it, but basically it's fixed. Tell Mr. Kramer not to spray cleaner into the whole carburetor. The fluid ate through the O rings and disintegrated the gaskets." She clambered to her feet, arched her back to work out kinks, and wiped her hands on the rag Doughboy had tossed her earlier.

"So what do I owe you?" Sank asked, his blue eyes sparkling with an interest that had nothing to do with her skills as a mechanic.

"I'll bill your boss." That boyish grin, those confident blue eyes, and wavy blond hair should have ignited her spark plugs, but she wasn't interested.

"No. What do I owe you personally? You saved my ass after all."

"How?" Her gaze slipped to the aforementioned piece of anatomy. And oh what a sexy ass it was, but unfortunately, she wouldn't allow herself to be tempted. Sank was a fine looking specimen, all lean brawn from his job as a trainer at the gym down the street, but she'd just been burned by her last boyfriend. A bad marriage and an equally bad rebound relationship made her want to swear off men forever.

He ran his wide hands along the sleek lines of Kramer's Harley, and his spicy

scent temporarily masked the strong gasoline odors. "I tried surgery on the old gal myself, and as you saw, I botched the job. Hey, how 'bout I take you out for dinner. I know a great Mediterranean restaurant." He touched her grease-stained hand with tanned fingers.

This wasn't his first attempt to take their newly formed friendship to the next level. He'd let her know on more than one occasion that he'd wanted more.

"Look, Sank. I'm fresh out of a relationship so..."

"So, I'm not getting to ride double anytime soon, eh? Not a prob, I'm a patient man. I am grateful you fixed this classic, though. Kramer would have my head, my ass, and my first born if anything were to happen to this ol' gal." He withdrew his hand and patted the back fender. "He loves this hog more than his wife, I think. Even more than I love my old Mustang."

She understood well the feeling. She loved T-Bone the same way. T-Bone had once belonged to her father. A 1998 Springer Softail with fringed saddlebags and custom painted gas tank, the black beast drew attention everywhere she rode her.

"Let me take her for a spin to make sure it's purring like it should, and you can haul this baby off," she said.

Behind them, the whirl of a drill and the clanging of metal on metal signaled other mechanics hard at work. Harleys hadn't been in production for several years now, but their repair shop was overrun with business. Folks of all ages collected the various models of motorcycles, devoting time and money into maintenance and fix-up. Angel understood the fascination and love owners had for their babies.

Angel stuffed her waist length, braided ponytail into the helmet and revved the engine. Exhaust fumes flooded the bay. The old gal fired up like a champ. The

thundering sound never ceased to make her heart pound. She loved the feel of the vibrating power between her thighs. Her right foot flipped the kickstand, and she let the bike idle while she “walked” it through the crowded shop. Once clear, she put it into first gear and turned into the street. The classic performed as if brand new.

One stretch around the block, and she brought the beauty home, pulling into the parking lot instead of the garage. Sank met her with a shit-eating grin on his ruggedly handsome face. “Damn, she sounds and looks great.”

“You brought her to the best.” Ego had nothing to do with that statement. Angel had been tinkering with engines and Harleys since she’d been potty trained.

“Thanks. I do owe you one.”

She nodded as she handed him final papers to sign. “Tell Kramer to take it easy the first thirty miles or so. Treat her like she was fresh off the assembly line.”

He accepted the duplicate receipt. “I thought paper was a thing of the past.”

“Doughboy doesn’t trust the cyber documents they require nowadays.” The government kept enough tabs on folks as it was.

“No one does, but we all do what we have to.” Sank folded the pink slip and tucked it into his back pocket before setting the helmet on his head. He straddled the bike and started the engine. “At least the gym is only a block away. I’m a mite uncomfortable driving Kramer’s prized possession.”

With no more comments, he took off on the teal machine. She folded her arms and appreciated the sleek lines. Funny that the bike had inspired her admiration more than Sank had. Motorcycles were no longer manufactured, and the antiques had to be fitted with after-market emissions regulators, but even with the stiff taxes and inspections they faced, only another motorcycle rider understood the obsession most owners felt for their bikes.

After filing the paperwork, she clocked out and headed for the break room. Doughboy planted his beefy hands on coverall-covered hips. "Thought you said you have work."

"I do. My shift at the Tiger's Den starts earlier than usual. Some sort of special review show."

"What about that oil change you promised to have done today?"

"I'll come in early tomorrow." She continued to weave through bikes in various stages of assembly. "It's almost seven. Don't you have an eclipse to watch?"

"Damn female mechanic." Doughboy swore under his breath.

She smiled. They both knew she was the best mechanic he employed, which was the only reason she could get by with her rude comments. No one else dared.

Doughboy's dog, Melba lifted her scraggy head as Angel sailed past. Her wrist com buzzed. She grimaced at the familiar face and refused to answer the summons. Let Dean stew for a while longer. The man deserved more than a cold shoulder for what he'd subjected her to this past week.

The call went to voice mail, and she stormed into the break room. The messy condition of the room didn't discourage her from using the facilities. Men were slob, especially men like Dean. She shoved a pair of dirty coveralls to the ground and plopped into a plastic chair. A hot shower would soothe her temper and remove the grime from a full day at work.

She bent to untie her sturdy work boots. At twenty-five, she didn't have a whole lot going for her. School hadn't appealed, mainly because she was a hands-on type of learner and sitting at a computer screen for hours on end just didn't rev her engine. A bit rough around the edges, she frightened most men, so dating

hadn't been all that successful either. No happily-married and picket fences for Angel. She'd tried that institute, but she'd chosen poorly. Edward Newton had turned out to be the worst sort of man she could have ever hooked up with. Tall, good looking and loaded, he'd swept her off her feet. Gullible, she'd married him with stars in her eyes. Three months later and pregnant, she'd gotten a cold dose of reality when she'd witnessed one of Edward's "business" deals. The memory made her shudder. She'd asked for a divorce a month later, but money and power had won him full custody of their daughter, Chloe.

She hadn't gone looking for another relationship when Dean entered her life, but she'd needed the distraction. Now, she just needed that loser out of her life.

When Dean discovered she'd changed the locks on the apartment, he'd started harassing her at work. He'd called tonight with a different verse to the same song. As if she had time to deal with the jerk. She barely had time to clean up for her next job. She stared at the dirt beneath her fingernails and grimaced, but the dirty condition of her hands didn't prevent her from taking a piece of chocolate from a dish on the cluttered counter and popping it into her mouth.

Savoring the rich flavor of dark chocolate, she turned her attentions to the shower stall. The faucet squealed when she turned it on. Doughboy didn't believe in modernizing the joint. Cold water ran forever until finally turning lukewarm. After stripping off her oily clothes and stepping into the stall, she closed her eyes and turned her face toward the warm shower spray. After a moment, she reached for the industrial body soap needed to remove cycle grease and the stench of a hard day at work. A small brush sat on a corner shelf, and she used it on her nails. Once she'd removed as much grime as possible, her thoughts gravitated toward the coming eclipse. She'd been born during the peak of an annular eclipse in Monterrey,

so perhaps she should be more than a little interested in the astronomical occurrence, but then maybe not. Anything dealing with the paranormal like living by the stars failed to fascinate her.

A gentle pounding of water soothed her sore muscles. Steam made the sides of the fiberglass stall sweaty with moisture. The gentle massage of a million water drops lulled her, and euphoria wrapped around her tense body. The rhythmic sound of the drumming drops created a comforting tempo. Angel smiled. She floated on waves of relaxing pleasure, determined to set aside her worries if only for a moment.

Slowly, Angel opened her eyes. Drudge buckets! The wrinkled skin on her fingers indicated she'd stayed too long. She was always late for one thing or another. Boss Harry docked tips if she didn't arrive at the Tiger's Den on time. Lethargic, she stepped back and tried to shake the sluggishness from her body. The showerhead wavered from sight. The water had completely turned to vapors. Groping for the brass faucet handles, her hand encountered nothing but vast emptiness. Her head jerked downward. The tile floor had disappeared. Instead, her feet stood on a plane of warm air.

Fright held her captive. The throes of a hallucination chained her in place.

She wrapped her arms around her middle, her mind alert. Steam swirled around her, lifting her, turning her. Her heart rate accelerated.

Her quotidian day had just spiraled into a dark zone.

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*Nyjord, Northwestern Francia in 919 AD*

Torin O'Faelain stood outside Fintan's hut with the rest of the thralls, awaiting the predicted event. He balled his fists at his side. He had no desire to be

here, but he had little choice. As a slave to the *Finn-Gaills*, the power to control his fate had been stripped away.

A glance at the opened doorway revealed a glimpse of Herre Erik with Wizard Fintan. The devil take them both. The wizard knew of his disdain, yet he continued to plague him. That Jarl Erik allowed the wizard such freedom amazed Torin. Fintan's traitorous bonding with the *Finn-Gaills* provided yet another reason for Torin to denounce Fintan's claim. Fintan might have been cursed to protect the O'Faelain heir, but Torin would ne'er accept the sorcerer's subvention.

"Wipe the anger from your face, Torin," Rurik said. "If the witch has her say, you'll be rid of Erik for a short time."

Torin ignored Rurik and glanced at Erik. "Aye, but I'm even less fond of his replacement."

"As a thrall, you've no right to be so bold. Mayhap, I'll trade your carcass for a more pliable slave."

Torin straightened his spine. "Herre Erik will no' allow your mischief."

Rurik narrowed his eyes, the only indication he'd taken offense at the insult. "Jarl Erik will soon travel to distant lands and will no longer hold sway over how you are treated. Tread lightly. I don't share Erik's sentimentality when it comes to dealing with vermin."

"You're a fool to believe Dísa's words."

"Mayhap, but a few moments will either see you serving my needs or serving my brother's. Either way, you'll still be a thrall."

Against his will, a shudder ran through his body. He loathed Rurik with every fiber of his being. The man took great pleasure in belittling him at every turn. At least, Erik treated him fairly. Unfortunately, the metal collar he wore choked any

contentment Torin might have found beneath Jarl Erik's rule.

"I am your humble servant." He gave a slight bow.

Laughter burst from Rurik's lips. "Humble, you are not."

Torin chose to remain silent. Past experience had taught him to be cautious with Rurik's temper, and he'd already overstepped the boundaries of good sense.

A few steps away, Jarl Erik stood quietly, a mummer who guarded his thoughts with a solemn face. Rurik found a position closer to the ceremonial arena. Torin waited. Patience would bear out the moment. The air crackled with tension and a foreboding that made Torin wish he were anywhere but here. Their sojourn to Fintan's hut had been preceded by the funeral of Rurik and Erik's oldest brother, Gustov. As part of the *Finn-Gaill's* death ceremony, their village witch, Dísá had been given a place of importance and an opportunity to practice her dark magick. Her sight revealed a most unlikely prophecy.

Fintan led Jarl Erik through the doorway and out into the bitter cold. While Erik shivered to the side, Fintan arranged medium sized rocks in a wide circle. At every placement, ancient Gaelic flowed from his lips, a performance that had the rest of the *Finn-Gaills* enthralled. For Torin, hearing the old language brought bittersweet memories of home.

Finally, Fintan positioned the last stone and rose from the circle he'd created. Gathered around the outer perimeter, Erik's *hirðmenn* stood tense, reluctant observers of Dísá's strange prediction. The witch leaned heavy on her cane. Torin sneered at the wizard. Fintan's involvement nettled his outward calm like the kiss of an asp.

Fintan gave a slight bow. "'Tis time, Herre Erik. Be ye ready?"

Jarl Erik inhaled a lung full of crisp air and closed his eyes. A moment later,

he nodded and focused his attention upon Torin. Either he chose to ignore the question or he hadn't heard. Instead, he yelled for his brother. "Rurik!"

Rurik wove through the flock of warm bodies to join Erik. "Ja, Erik."

"If Dísá's words prove true, I'll vanish when the sun leaves the sky. You will rule in my stead, but I give one last order."

"I will strive to uphold your honor until you return."

"I *will* return. This I must believe."

Dísá cackled, a sound that rivaled the screech of a wounded raven. "As day blends into night, the chosen one will travel forward through time. Our king seeks the true blood of Lotharsonn. Jarl Erik will return. Until such time, a woman will hold his place in this time."

"You see much for a blind woman, Dísá," Erik said.

"Ja, my jarl."

"Woman? Of what does she speak?" Rurik demanded.

Even Torin's interest rose. He knew very little about Dísá's prophecy save Jarl Erik's journey somewhere far. Had he heard correctly? Had the *völva* claimed a distance in time? What nonsense. And why had he been summoned as witness to this sacred moment? Did Erik's hate run so deep he would now consider human sacrifice? Torin glanced toward the stone circle. A trickle of sweat ran beneath his collar, a trail of worry along sun-bronzed skin.

"Did ye no' tell your brother?" Fintan spoke to Jarl Erik, but turned ebony eyes upon Torin. Torin shifted his weight but resisted the urge to tug at his collar. Fintan chuckled. "Ach, poor lad. Ye still ha'e no trust in me. I could release ye from this hell, but you're far too prideful."

"I would prefer death to your brand of help." He would never seek Fintan's

help. While he blamed Erik for his sister, Ailis's death, he blamed Fintan for the death of his son.

"Forsooth, you play the stubborn martyr well. I often feared Fintan would see you freed, but he never did. 'Tis because you wouldn't allow it. I would know why." Jarl Erik circled him as he spoke. Torin stood as still as a fawn and weathered the inspection with a calm he did not feel.

"'Tis because I need my hate to fester, to breed. One day, I will avenge the deaths of those I held dear."

Without warning, Rurik looped a finger into the collar and tugged Torin close. "You've had two years to try. What keeps you from this vengeance you would seek? If not for Jarl Erik's wishes, you'd find yourself bound for heathen slave markets. "

Rurik pushed Torin away with such force, he fell against one of Erik's men. Torin righted himself and turned his heated glare on the jarl's brother. The man had every right to treat him in such a manner and no right at all. God, but he longed to defend himself. He stiffened his spine and felt the taut scars upon his back stretch. Nay, he would do naught this day to inspire Rurik's full temper, especially if in a few moments, the beast would become his master while Erik was away. Nay, Torin would choose a better time and place, when the man's *hirðmenn* didn't offer protection.

Erik speared Fintan with hard, blue eyes. "'Tis a bad idea to place the woman in Torin's hut. I begin to doubt Dísa's wisdom."

"'Tis because ye believe most men would find it a boon to receive a woman captive. The lad willna think kindly of your gift. Nay. In fact, he'll think ye do so just to torment him further."

Woman? They wished to foist a woman upon him? Torin fisted his hands at

his sides.

Rurik wore a puzzled frown. "Again, you speak of a woman. Enlighten me."

"Look. The sun begins to fade." Fintan pushed Jarl Erik toward the circle. "Ye must enter afore it's too late."

Erik looked grim but resigned. "Rurik, when the sun vanishes, so too, will I. In my place, a strange woman will appear. She will be a prisoner of circumstance. As such, she will need a guardian. Before witnesses, I command you place her in Torin's keeping."

"Would you bestow upon your worst enemy such a precious gift?" Rurik protested, citing individual *hirðmenn* who were more deserving.

Fintan interrupted and crooked his finger at Erik. "Come. Ye must stand within the circle."

Erik moved forward and stepped into the center. Several warblers flew off, startled by their sudden appearance. Celtic symbols decorated the ground, carved into the dirt with a sharp knife and sprinkled with white sand. Torin remembered well similar proceedings, but that was before being enslaved, before his father's death, before he'd lost his right to govern his own clan.

Before Torin could offer his own objections, a fine mist rose from the ground. Through the hazy vapors, Erik stood with his arms akimbo and his feet braced. His form took on a ghostly appearance.

Torin leaned closer to Fintan. "I care not what Jarl Erik commanded. I'll have no woman in my hut. Rurik will see the wisdom in giving her to another."

Fintan seemed to cast an uneasy glance toward Rurik before slipping into Gaelic. "Nay, Rurik will think he makes your life more miserable in giving you the woman. He'll nay know o' her wisdom, her fire. Treat her kindly for she'll be lost

and confused. She's nay o' this world."

"A woman? Have you any idea of what you ask?" Torin gritted his teeth. He had no use for a woman. The lass would encroach on his plans.

"She'll be your salvation in the long o' it."

Salvation? His only salvation would come from destroying the *Finn-Gaill* before returning to Éire to restore his family name.

Unfortunately, redemption had a price. He couldn't achieve his plan without giving up a piece of his pride. With Erik gone, he would have to work harder toward his goal. By submitting to Rurik's demands, he might eventually convince Rurik of his trustworthiness. Once Rurik lessened his guard, Torin could make good his escape. But he never dreamed they might force a woman on him.

"I'll no' be made a nursemaid to some simpering female."

"Cease your heathen chatter." Rurik glared at them. "You disrupt a solemn rite."

A collective gasp erupted from the gathered *hirðmenn*. Daylight vanished. A large black shape covered the sun. Only a rim of golden light shown down upon the ceremonial circle. Darkness had claimed the day.

Torin strained his eyes. The mist had become a dense fog that hid Jarl Erik's large form. Torin peered into the shrouded circle. A presage of something akin to danger crept along his skin. An icy cape settled upon his shoulders. Shivering, he drew his thin sagum tighter around his body. Nay, both Fintan and Dísa were wrong. He would not believe a witch's words. Surely, with the return of the sun, the prophecy would prove false.

The blight upon the sun shifted, sliding ever so slowly across the light. Silence became a suffocating companion. All eyes and ears were attuned to the

ceremonial ring. The haze faded, lifting to reveal a spot devoid of human form; Erik had disappeared.

In the eerie silence, the breaking of twigs had each man shifting their gazes. His breath caught. A vision of raw beauty stood framed by a shadowy army of trees, her feminine curves and full breasts an enticing treat for a man deprived of such pleasures. A woman had taken Erik's place. *His woman.*

A shrill scream cut through the silence, a stabbing force that shattered the tense moment.

Rurik ran forward, his sword drawn.

The female perched like a frightened rabbit, her brown eyes wide and her long legs trembling.

Torin shook the daze from his tawny head, no longer mindful of the cold. "I'll no' accept Jarl Erik's bribe, for surely there can be no other meaning to this jest. A woman is the last thing I want to deal with. In truth, a woman would make things worse. I'll have no part of it. None, you hear?"

An edge of panic accompanied his declaration, but none heard his vehement words. Their attention centered fully on the woman. By the saints, why would Erik give him a woman? A female would only cause trouble. Escape would prove more difficult with another to care for. He was hard pressed to find time to work on the raft he'd begun as it was. For the moment, he only had himself to worry over. He didn't want the responsibility for another.

The swarm of curious men swelled forward. She screamed again, a pitiful sound that solicited laughter from her tormentors.

Torin stared at the curtain of male bodies that now hid her from his view. A fly landed on his arm, but he barely noticed.

*A woman?* He hadn't been with a woman in more than two years. He'd been too consumed with thoughts of revenge to even give the softer sex a second thought.

A female living in his small hut seemed beyond his capacity to grasp. To his utter shame, he grew hard considering the lusty possibilities. May the goddesses help him. He didn't want this added burden. His vision for the future blurred, making him surly and frustrated.

"Great Mother, only a poor sod like me would encounter such hardship," Torin whispered to himself.

"The Great Mother has granted ye this honor. 'Twould no' go well, if ye were tae abuse this gift."

Torin whirled at the sound of Fintan's voice. *Abuse the gift*, indeed. Fintan had no idea the demons toying with his mind at present. He felt no honor in having all his plans thwarted.

He shouldered through the crowd of men, curious to view his *gift* and froze. Dark brown eyes fastened upon him with such intensity a stab of pure lust entered his veins. He hardened and his nostrils flared. Her unconventional long legs, pert breasts, and slender body presented a delicate feast for a starving man. He cringed, not at all happy with the way his body reacted to the sight of the black-haired beauty. The unwanted temptation was no gift, more like a curse.

*I'm doomed.*