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Cariad Hal  
Bitter is the Wind

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BITTER IS THE WIND



CARIAD HAL



## CHAPTER 1



WHEN YOU FEEL the wild inside...do you run?



CROUCHING DOWN, she gazed out over the water. She could barely see the purple, waving heather on the towering mountains or the silver shimmer on the water through the pain pounding in her head. How could he do it? The father she had loved with all her heart had abandoned and betrayed her. How many months had it been? She had given up marking the days, counting them away.

*It is not to be.*

In the dark of the nights and the endless toil of the days, her mind hurt from the cruel thoughts tumbling inside her head.

Sitting by the water's edge, she shivered with the strengthening wind of the gathering storm and felt the first rain. The heavy raindrops splashed into the deep water of the fjord, spreading rings across its stillness, and the rising scent of the wet earth and pine forest filled her breath. The rain running through her hair was chilling. She longed to crawl into the

shelter of the fragrant undergrowth and not return. By now, they would know she was missing. Her stomach lurched.

She started the scramble up the steep path to the mountain track. The rain was heavy and thunder rumbled around the dark mountain tops. Pulling her shawl up over her head, she looked up to the ridge. Rivulets of water tipped over its edge and ran down around her feet, soaking the rough cloth of her tunic. Sighing, she pulled up her tunic and, holding on to her shawl as best she could, pushed on for the ridge.

Hauling herself up over the edge, she struggled to stand in the blustering wind blowing down from the sheer mountains, taking her breath away. Her hair blew free from her shawl and whipped across her face. Blinking, she peered through the curled, wet tendrils of hair, looking to the settlement in the far distance. The track ahead of her had turned to mud. It would be dark before she got back. She did not want to go back. She could choose to die in this cold and mud or struggle back to the hated place.

Abria, her father had called her, because she was strong and powerful. She stared down the track and drew herself up. She had to believe her fortunes could change. Her curses and his ownership had saved her from harm, but for how long? Cautiously, she stepped forward, pulling her feet with the thin leather shoes out of the sucking mud.

The frost giants that lived in the high mountains were stirring the clouds, blowing the wind and throwing down the rain. They pierced the clouds with lightning and boomed thunder through the heavens. Abria tried in vain to hold onto her shawl but it blew away from her. Twisting round to catch it, her feet sank into the mud with each step and she fell into the quagmire.

Winded, she could barely move. The earth beneath her shook with the rolling thuds of thunder. Pushing her hands into the mud, she staggered onto her feet. The thundering grew

stronger and she swung round in fear. This was not the thunder of the giants. Out of the mist of the storm, a galloping horse hurtled towards her. She screamed and threw herself to the ground, rolling away to escape its hooves.

The horse skidded and jumped sideways, rearing up, frantically neighing and splattering mud as it floundered. Abria peered out from her muddied arms. It was perilously close to her, but if she moved any further she would tumble down to the deep fjord. The rider jumped off and grabbed the reins, holding firm, desperately trying to calm the animal. He slipped in the mud, narrowly missing the flailing hooves but steadied himself on the taut reins. The horse began to quiet, breathing hot air into the mountain mist. The rider talked soothingly to it, stroking its neck and pushed its heavy body away from her.

He turned to her, holding the skittish horse tightly. His long, wet hair blew wildly in the wind and his eyes flashed with anger.

“Get up, you foolish woman!” he yelled, spitting wet hair out of his mouth.

“I would if I could!” she screamed back at him, struggling to stand up, her soaked clothes binding her in the mud.

“What in fuck’s name are you doing here?” he shouted, angrily.

“Walking! Until you rode over me!” She floundered as she battled with the mud, pulling her tunic out of the mire and losing her shoe in the boggy mess.

He watched her struggle but she was getting nowhere.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” he cursed. He pulled his horse away and tied it to a tree.

Strong arms grabbed her and hauled her out of the sucking mud, dropping her firmly on the higher path. He stood back, steadying himself and looked at her. Rain dripped from her hair and hardly a bit of her was not caked with mud.

“Are you sure you are not one of the hidden people?” he said. His lips twitched a smile.

“No, I am not!” she protested, wiping her face with her filthy hand. “I was fine until you rode me down!”

“I think the fault lies with you,” he corrected. “A woman should not be out alone. Scaring horses.”

“I don’t scare horses! I told you I was walking.” She shook and shivered, cold and wet through.

“That doesn’t explain why you are here in the first place.”

She glared at him, sullenly.

“Well? Where are you from?”

He crossed his arms and waited for an answer. Why was he not disturbed by this insufferable weather, she wondered?

“Eire is my home!” she blurted out. Her heart swelled with the sound of the sacred name of her homeland. Until now it had been just a song on her hushed lips so she would never forget the sound of it. “Not this place with mountains and seas that cannot be traversed.”

He looked puzzled. She spoke well. “You are a slave?”

“No! Never will I be a slave! For anyone!” she yelled.

He looked out into the distance. “You must belong to Gudrun. There is no other steading in this valley. It still does not explain why you are here in this sorry state, but no matter.”

He strode through the squelching earth and untied his horse, leading it over to her. The horse was still wary and uncertain of its footing on the slippery path but the rider threw himself skillfully into the saddle and reached down to Abria.

“Come. Give me your hand.”

Abria took a step away from him. “No man will take me,” she said defiantly.

He scoffed. “By the blood of the gods, I have no desire for you, you sodden wench. But I’ll not leave any woman to drown in mud. And you belong to Gudrun. I have business there so I shall return you to her.”

"I don't belong to anyone!"

"So you say. That is for Gudrun to decide. Now take my hand and ride behind me."

Still she hesitated. The horse grew restless and the rain fell relentlessly from the darkening skies. She could not be more drenched.

"I'll not wait longer. You will be dead before you get back on foot. Is that your choice?"

"Why do you think I would want to go back there?" she shouted, looking behind her at the steep drop back to the fjord, just a step away.

He growled, reached down and grabbed her arm. In one powerful movement he swung her up behind him on the saddle.

She cried out, winded as she hit the saddle. "No!"

"Fuck's sake, stop complaining and hold on. I have no wish to have a muddy wench on my mount and you stink, but I'll not let you perish so I have no choice... and neither do you."

"That place is a prison!" she cried.

"That's as may be, but it's your only place. Now hold on and let's get out of this."

He wheeled his horse about and urged it on. Instinctively, she wrapped her arms around the stranger and buried her fingers into his tunic as the horse leapt forward. She tried to stop the tears that ran down her face. Lost up here in the unforgiving mountains and lost and punished in her life back at the homestead.