



The Viking's Touch (Victorious Vikings Book 2)

By Joanna Fulford

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For the safety of her son, Anwyn will risk everything. Even giving herself to a Viking warrior who teaches her not all men are monsters—although he shows little sign that he will ever again be capable of love.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Joanna Fulford's two great passions as a child were horses and writing. Riding developed her love of and respect for the countryside – though it was sometimes seen at much closer quarters than anticipated – and writing allowed exploration of the inner landscape. But teaching was Joanna's calling for many years, and she only left education to pursue writing full-time when it became a growing compulsion!

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Wulfgar stood at the ship's prow, his keen gaze scanning the curve of yellow sand and the rolling dunes beyond, but the small bay was deserted save for the gulls riding currents of air. Heavy cloud scudded across a lowering sky, the remnant of the previous night's storm. The only sounds were the wind and the crash of the surf along the shore where churned sand and a line of bladderwrack and driftwood remained to testify to its passing.

'This will do well enough,' he said. 'We'll bring her in here.' Beside him Hermund nodded. 'Where do you reckon here is?'

'The Anglian coast probably, although it's hard to be certain.'

'Well, it seems quiet enough, my lord.'

'All the same, we'll send out a party of men to check.'

'Right you are.'

Wulfgar gave the order and a few minutes later the ship's keel ploughed into sand. The crew shipped oars and Wulfgar, with half-a-dozen others, vaulted over the gunwale into the surf and waded ashore. They sprinted up the beach and climbed the dunes. Beyond lay an expanse of heath interspersed with rough turf and clumps of yellow gorse. In the distance were cultivated strips and stands of trees. 'It'll do,' said Wulfgar.

Hermund surveyed the surrounding landscape, his weathered face thoughtful, shrewd grey eyes missing nothing. At three and thirty he was six years older than his companion and a few strands of grey hair showed among the brown, but the quiet deference with which he treated the latter revealed their relative positions in the world.

'Aye, my lord. All the same those fields must belong to someone.'

'We'll post guards.'

'The local inhabitants may be friendly, of course.'

'Perhaps,' replied Wulfgar. 'Although I wasn't planning on staying around long enough to get acquainted. We

have an appointment to keep.'

'Rollo won't quibble; he needs warriors and he wants the best.'

'He'll get them, and pay handsomely for the privilege.' Hermund grinned. 'Naturally.'

They turned and led the way back to the ship where teams of men had already begun to drag her higher up the beach.

'We've done all right in the last six years,' Hermund continued. 'If luck stays with us, we'll be able to retire soon on the proceeds.'

Wulfgar made no reply. His silence was not due to inattention; he had heard the words perfectly well and privately acknowledged their truth. He commanded a body of fighting men whose reputation went ahead of them: they could name their price in the full expectation of it being paid without argument. And luck had certainly been with them in that respect. Some even went so far as to say that their leader bore a charmed life for he emerged unscathed from every conflict. He had no fear of death; for a while he had actively sought it. Yet, perversely, death mocked him, often tantalisingly close in the heat of combat, but remaining always out of reach. He had resigned himself to it now, watching with cynical amusement as his wealth increased.

Unaware of his chief's thoughts, Hermund surveyed the damage to the ship. 'Torn sail, broken yard, cracked rudder.. but we got off lightly, all things considered. Only three men hurt, too.'

'Aye, it could have been worse.'

'Several times back there I thought we were food for the fishes.'

'If we don't fix the damage, we soon will be,' said Wulfgar. 'Organise a work detail while I check on the injured.'

Moments later Hermund's voice rang out, 'Thrand! Beorn! Asulf! Get that sail down! Dag and Frodi, help them to free that yard! The rest of you over here...'

As they hastened to obey, the ship became a hive of activity. Wulfgar watched for a few moments, then went over to see the injured men. In the course of the storm one had fallen and concussed himself and a second had a deep and ragged gash along his arm, which was going to require stitching. The third had broken ribs. However, now that they were ashore the injuries could be treated more easily, and Wulfgar offered what reassurance he could.

Having done that, he rejoined the others. Several days' hard labour lay ahead, but he didn't mind it; hard labour meant forgetfulness, his mind focused on the present. Time dulled pain, but not memory. Only work could do that, for a while at least.

It was about an hour later when one of the lookouts recalled his attention. 'Riders approaching, my lord.'

Wulfgar looked up quickly, narrowing his eyes against the wind. He saw the strangers at once: six horsemen reined in on the edge of the bay some hundred yards distant. Their attention was clearly focused on the ship.

'Damn.'

The word was softly spoken, but Hermund caught it all the same. 'What do you want to do?'

'That depends on them. We'll wait and discover their intent. It may just be curiosity.'

'Perhaps.'

Wulfgar surveyed the newcomers. 'We're not looking for trouble. Tell the men to keep their weapons within reach, but no one's to use them without my say so.'

'Will do.' His companion glanced at the riders again. 'At least there are only six of them.'

'That we can see.'

'Point taken.'

The horsemen rode out on to the beach at an easy pace. Now they were closer Wulfgar could see that all of them were armed. However, their hands were conspicuously clear of their sword hilts. He noted it; if there really were only six, they weren't about to stir up trouble, particularly when they didn't know as yet whom they might be dealing with.

The riders halted a few yards clear of the nearest crew members. Their leader, a burly figure in his late thirties perhaps, leaned on the saddle pommel and looked around, stony-faced, impassive, cold eyes taking in the details. Sound died as the crew returned the attention. For several moments both groups weighed each other up.

'Part of somebody's war band or I miss my guess,' murmured Hermund.

Wulfgar nodded almost imperceptibly. 'My thought exactly. The question is, where are the others and how many?'

The leader of the horsemen broke the surrounding silence. 'Who is chief of this rabble crew?'

'That would be me.' Wulfgar strolled forwards. 'Was there something you wanted?'

The stranger's lip curled in a sneer. 'You're trespassing.' 'The shore belongs to no man,' replied Hermund. 'Not this bit of shore.'

'Unfortunately my ship was damaged in the storm last night,' explained Wulfgar. 'We need to carry out repairs.'

'Well, go and do them somewhere else. You're not wanted here, Viking.'

Wulfgar held his temper. 'The work will only take a few days. When it's complete we'll leave.'

'You'll go now if you know what's good for you. Lord Ingvar doesn't like intruders, especially not pirates.'

'That is unfortunate.'

'Unfortunate for you right enough.' He smiled nastily, an expression mirrored in the faces of his five

companions.

'That remains to be seen.'

'So you're telling me you're not leaving?'

Wulfgar nodded. 'That's about the size of it.'

For a moment the other met and held his gaze. Then he shrugged and turned his horse's head. 'Don't say you weren't warned.'

With that the mounted group turned and cantered away.

'Nice,' said Hermund. 'I reckon we can expect another visit quite soon, and with reinforcements.'

'They could have been bluffing,' replied Thrand.

Hermund shook his head. 'Not a chance. He'd never have made the threat unless he knew he could back it up.'

'Hermund's right,' said Wulfgar.

Thrand grinned. 'Do we get ready for a fight then, my lord?' 'We do.'

The men around them exchanged anticipatory glances. Thrand's fist closed on the hilt of his dagger.

'I'll look forward to silencing Big Mouth myself.'

'Don't count your chickens,' said Hermund. 'We don't know how many friends Big Mouth has got yet.'

'Just so,' replied Wulfgar, 'which is why we need to be ready for them. Arm yourselves.'

Users Review

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