

THE SON OF NINE SISTERS

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CHAPTER 1

The train ride to Valhalla takes 40 minutes, according to the schedule. Of course, the schedule doesn't take into account today's lightning strike that knocks a rather hefty tree branch onto the rail lines. The weather of the past week has been unusually warm and the high humidity has made things feel more like mid-summer than late spring. Today began particularly ominous, eerily calm as if the weather was biding its time, waiting for the perfect moment to blow in a storm strong enough to change the face of reality. The clouds were hanging heavy in the sky and, through the breaks between them, anyone who looked could see the thunderhead reaching toward the heavens, yet laden with moisture it needed desperately to release. And the smell of rain lingered faintly in the air, another subtle warning of things to come.

When the storm decides to make its appearance, we are already en route to Valhalla. Just as expected, when it comes, it hits fast and hard. One of the lightning strikes zaps the tree whose branch now lies on the metro north tracks, thus spinning today's 40-minute train ride into double time and it takes nearly an hour and a half to get from Grand Central Station to Valhalla. Worst of all, the train windows don't open and the train car grows humid quickly; I am starting to sweat as another clap of thunder causes the other passengers to stir.

When I was a kid, my mom used to tell me that thunder was made by Jesus bowling in heaven. When there was an especially loud clap of thunder and a bright flash of lightning, it meant he got a strike. That story never made sense to me. It just filled my mind with some equally confusing questions about who he was playing with and how bowling made it rain. I think I would have been more satisfied if someone would have said simply, "Hey, when there is a flash of lightning, the lightning is so hot that it super heats the air around it. It adds way more pressure to the air too. These two things make a shock wave in the air

that creates the sound of thunder.” True, I may not have understood that at age five, but it would have been a better image to ponder than some guy, with long dark hair and a beard, wearing a toga and bowling shoes.

Today on the train, there’s another thunder and lightning story, one of Thor being on a rampage. Some barely twenty-something calls across the aisle to his friend to be careful or Thor would get him next with his bolt of lightning, revenge for his friend’s inappropriate behavior at the end of year frat party last weekend. They stand and sit and reach into and across the aisle at one another. They yell and laugh as if they’re the only ones on the train. They’re rather obnoxious and so distracting that I don’t even bother to look out the window at the torrential rain.

I glance at them and roll my eyes. There’s a woman, slightly younger than I am I’d guess, sitting directly behind them. She shakes her head at the ridiculousness of them. I smile at her to let her know she’s not alone in being annoyed. At this, she rises and walks toward me with a very intent look on her face that’s slightly unsettling. She maneuvers past the frat boys as if to walk directly through them. They don’t even acknowledge her passing by getting out of the way.

She settles into the aisle seat across from me, lowering herself gently onto its cracked brown vinyl covering. She’s petite and I’m caught off-guard by the way her eyes sparkle as if they were kissed by the sun before being encircled by the clear blue sky. Her presence is unnerving. On one hand, I sense an innocence about her that’s quite freeing; on the other, she possesses a quality that’s determined and confident. She stares straight ahead, so to make it look like I have something to do, I start fishing through my purse for nothing. She doesn’t know I’m looking for nothing though.

“They don’t know Thor,” she says monotonously and I’m surprised how easily I hear her words, despite the ruckus from the frat boys.

Her comment moves me from unnerved to uncertain that I heard her correctly. “Excuse me?” I ask. Did she just say

something about Thor? I raise an eyebrow. I'd been thinking more along the lines of, 'stupid frat boys'.

Flicking back her short blond hair, she squints her eyes at me a moment, looks me in the face, then glances down at my necklace. Flatly, she says, "You know who Thor is." She turns her gaze forward again.

"Not really," I confess.

She looks, again, at my necklace, "You do. That is Mjölnir, Thor's hammer."

I grab my necklace. She's right; my necklace is Thor's hammer, but I must explain, "I wear this because it was a gift from my cousin." I've heard references before about Thor, the God of Thunder, but have no idea what purpose his hammer served, though I don't tell her that.

"No," she insists, "there's more to it."

"I'm sorry. I really don't understand what you mean. Honestly, I don't know anything about Thor," I clarify.

"But you know that what that kid just said is utter nonsense," she confirms, nodding slightly toward the frat boys.

I look at her like, 'Of course. We all know it's nonsense, because Thor doesn't exist,' but I say, "Well, yeah."

Shortly, I find out that her reason for his comment being utter nonsense has nothing to do with the fact that Thor doesn't exist and everything to do with how and why Thor creates thunder and lightning. For now, she smiles and asks, "So, what's your favorite story about him?"

"Him?"

"Thor," a 'duh' tone rings clear in her voice.

"Stories?" I inquire.

She nods.

"About Thor?" I'm nervous and curious at the same time. She could be a complete nut job or a trivia buff; who knows?

Detecting or accepting my ignorance, her squint becomes a stare into my eyes in inspection to determine whether she should share her knowledge of this mysterious

god with me. Perhaps it's the hammer around my neck that prompts the more detailed explanation from her of Thor as Thunder God or maybe she senses my genuine curiosity and ignores my suspicions. Either way, she begins with my necklace.

"You're wearing Mjöllnir, Thor's hammer. You should know why," she begins.

I think, 'I do know why. It reminds me of my cousin,' but I say nothing.

"Thor uses Mjöllnir to protect the people of Midgard by killing giants with it. He crushes their skulls. He would never harm a human," she explains, and again her tone is weighted with that 'duh' tone, because everyone knows this.

As she tells me this, I realize why she thinks the college guy's comment is nonsense. She doesn't think it's nonsense because Thor doesn't exist. She knows it's nonsense, because Thor uses his hammer to *protect* humans, not to harm them.

She goes on to tell me all about Thor's fierce temper, quickly lost, but quickly regained, and about his bright red hair and beard. After telling me about the giants' skulls that he crushes to protect Midgard, she says, "Thunder is the sound humans hear when Thor is crushing giant skulls, but the thunder and lightning associated with today's storm may not be Thor thrashing giants."

"No?" I ask, but my sarcasm doesn't register with her.

She leans in, "I think he has other reasons for kicking up this storm. I think there's something in Midgard that needs attention, so he's caused this disruption to give time."

"Why not? He's a god, right? And gods have all kinds of power to do things. Why not create time?" I stick with sarcasm to reason out her statement.

"He doesn't 'create' time; not exactly," she corrects me. "He created a delay, which gives time."

I'm so glad she clarified. I know I should just smile and nod and hope that she stops talking, but I can't help myself. "So, Thor created a delay to give time so that something in Midgard can be dealt with. And, where is Midgard?"

She lets go a little sigh, then begins to explain Thor and the entire pantheon of Norse gods to me. This is one of the things I learn; Thor is a Norse god, from Scandinavia, Germany and even the British Isles. Oh, and Midgard is, “the realm of the humans”, which I take to mean Earth. Suddenly, the train delay becomes much more interesting, whether Thor made it happen or not. This woman, whose name I fail to ask, is like a walking encyclopedia of information on Norse Mythology. I confess she tells me way more about Thor than I can absorb or remember, but it’s fascinating to listen to her glide from one bit of Norse trivia to the next and rattle off the names of gods and goddesses I’ve never heard of. Yet, the way she says them, there’s something distantly familiar about them. There’s Odin, Freyr, Freyja, Frigg, Njörd, Mimir. The list goes on. Odin, she tells me straight away, is the Chief god and lives in a palace called Valhalla, the same name as the town to which my friends and I are traveling today.

After sitting motionless on its track for nearly forty-five minutes, the train jerks into motion again just as she begins her next story. She says this story tells how Thor gets his hammer, but before she can say more than that, Christian appears and pokes me in the cheek.

Christian is one in a group of friends I’m riding the train with today. Our friends, Mary Jane and Simon, bought a house in Valhalla and we’re heading up for Memorial Day weekend to help them unpack, paint, landscape, whatever they need to get the house ready before baby number two arrives this fall. Valhalla, New York might not be the first place that comes to mind when making holiday plans, but friends in need... You know the rest.

I turn in his direction with an annoyed look, “That was rude.”

“Sorry, but you were staring at the floor and not responding to my waves,” he explains.

“I was listening,” I tell him.

“To what? The sound of the wheels moving?”

“No,” I assure him and turn to the woman sitting across from me to apologize for Christian’s interruption, but she’s not there. “She’s gone. Where did she go?” I ask, scanning the car for her.

“Who?”

“The woman who was sitting right here when you so rudely poked me in the cheek,” I explain glancing toward the frat boys again.

“There was no one sitting there, Stacy,” he replies.

“Yes,” I insist, “There was.”

“I didn’t notice anyone sitting there,” he restates his comment. “Is that better?”

“No. How could you not see her? She was right here. She had short blond hair and she was wearing a greenish blue shirt. It’s like she disappeared,” I say putting my fingers up to my mouth.

“Maybe she didn’t disappear. Maybe I’m right and she was never there?”

“She was here and she was talking to me, telling me about Thor,” I inform him.

“Talking to you?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” He changes the subject, “So, we found a group of seats together in the next car. Come sit with us. We should be there in about 20 minutes now that we’re finally moving again.” He waves me forward with a toss of his head.

Still wondering how she vanished so quickly, I look back down the train car to where she’d been sitting originally. She’s not there either. I look past Christian to see if she is further ahead in the train.

“What are you doing?” Christian stops in the aisle and looks back at me with his hands on his hips.

“I just can’t believe she snuck off without my noticing where she went. She was telling me some really cool stuff. Bizarre, but cool,” I say looking back one last time.

“You know,” Christian begins glancing at me over his shoulder as he turns to walk to the next car, “if you needed

someone to talk to, you do have half a dozen friends on board with you.”

“Yeah, but she was telling me all these interesting things I’d never heard of before. None of you could tell me anything I don’t already know,” I retort, bothered by his questioning tone and the fact that she did just seem to disappear. Before we exit to the next train car, I give one last quick glance over my shoulder to see if I can spot her. No luck.

“So,” he continues over his shoulder, “what was the disappearing woman telling you that was so interesting?”

“She did not disappear,” I protest. “In fact, it’s a shame you didn’t see her. I think you may have found her quite attractive. She was very beautiful.” I’m not sure what possesses me to comment on her looks, but it’s true, she was lovely.

In the next car, Christian plops down next to Julie. I look at him and, despite his sarcasm, he makes me smile. I must confess Christian is my favorite of all my friends. He’s so passionate about everything he believes or doesn’t believe. One of Christian’s number one beliefs is that belief in a higher power is rubbish, a belief I share, but about which I’m not so passionate.

“I’m sorry I missed her if she was so captivating,” he states. “A beautiful disappearing woman.”

His comment captures Julie’s attention and she leans in, “Disappearing woman?”

“Beautiful and disappearing,” Christian corrects her. “Apparently, she was quite the conversationalist too. Stacy was entranced by their conversation about... what did you say you were talking about?”

“We were talking about Norse gods,” I reply with a sigh, not wanting to say too much, because I’ve already forgotten most of what she said.

“Norse gods? You mean like Odin?” Julie asks and I’m taken aback that she knows more about them than I do. Granted, she names only one god, but still that’s more than I could name thirty minutes ago. I mean I’m the one with the

History degree. Her degree is in Theatre or clothing design or something like that. Oh sure, my focus was on the American west, but still you'd think that, somewhere in the sixteen history courses I took at UCLA, Norse Mythology would have come up at least once.

"Yeah," is all my shock allows me.

"Careful," Dan leans over the seat. "She might be one of those Pagan witches. You didn't say anything that might set her off did you? I mean I don't want to spend the weekend with a hexed woman."

"Someone has been hexed?" Max chimes in on Dan's British-based humor. "I love a good hexing."

"Would you all stop and let Stacy finish her story?" Christian alludes to seriousness, but takes a jab at me in the end. "She is the newest convert to belief in a higher power or, in her case, about a dozen higher powers, each with their own 'special' abilities. My friend the polytheist. I'm so proud. Go on. What else did your fellow Pagan say?"

"You wouldn't be laughing and joking if that were true though, would you?" I ask Christian.

"But we both know it's not true, don't we?" Christian contends. "Stacy, if there's one thing I know, it's that you are no more likely to start believing in a god or, in this case, several gods, than I am," he kisses my head as if to celebrate our atheism.

"So, what were you talking about?" Max gets us back on point.

"She was talking... about Norse Mythology. I was listening. It was quite interesting. She was just starting to tell me how Thor got his hammer when Christian butted in," I try to recover.

"Well, what did she say about it?" Julie asks.

"I'm not sure how it all ties together since I didn't get to hear the whole thing, but it begins with someone cutting off Thor's wife's hair," I remember this much.

"So, he went and got a hammer to pummel the guy who did it?" Christian asks, then laughs at his own mockery.

And so the weekend begins with the four of them arguing on the train for the next fifteen minutes about how Thor got his hammer and what he used it for.

I let them go on, but I stop talking and wonder how she vanished so quickly. For a second, I consider walking through the train to look for her. Instead, I take a deep breath and relax. Eventually, my mind wanders from her and the Norse gods and, when we arrive at our destination, I'm thinking about something else that I don't remember five minutes later, but I'm sure it's less interesting than the Norse gods and goddesses.

The train jerks to a stop at the Valhalla station. My friends and I grab our bags and bound out of the train ready to meet our hosts, be covered in paint, and even allow a paper cut or two from opening boxes.

When I step off the train, I'm mildly surprised to be standing on dirt and not a concrete or wooden platform. The bigger shock comes when I look up from the ground and see a building, a huge building, like nothing I've ever seen before nor imagined in my life. The roof is covered in huge, round, gold plates and there are weird trees in front of and on top of it. Animals are everywhere, both domestic and wild – goats, wolves, eagles, ravens. A goat and a deer are on top of the building grazing on a golden tree. There are benches covered in what looks to be mail armor, similar to what medieval knights wore. Leaning against the benches and the doorways are spears, shields, axes, and swords. I see people gathered around the door and, although they are about twenty yards away, I can see them plainly. They are all injured, with gaping wounds exposing their insides, mangled limbs, nearly severed necks. One man, who keeps laughing quite incessantly, looks like he's had his cheek hacked off, so his jaw is raw and appears quite unnatural when he chuckles. I choke back a bit unsettled, but there's no blood, except for what has dried on their skin or hasn't been washed off, and none of them seem to be in any pain. In fact, some are dueling and most are laughing and drinking mead out of

horns. One man, I think, is juggling swords, six or more at once.

I freeze in my tracks. I blink my eyes once, twice, to make it go away. I shake my head and drop my bag in disbelief. This vision is real. I hear the people laughing and talking, hear the animals neighing and bleating, and smell them too. I feel the same mild breeze that's blowing over them. It's refreshing and cool, not like the stale humid air created by the thunderstorm we just rode through on the train. Within seconds, their world envelopes me and I look at my feet to see if they are willing to take me closer.

Only when Christian shoves my bag into my side do I snap out of this ancient settlement. While Julie asks if I'm okay, Dan picks up on his earlier joke line, "I knew it. She's been hexed! She's probably going to zone out like that all weekend and each one will get longer and longer..." He laughs, as do the others, but he would think again about his comment if he had seen what I just saw. It seemed so real.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Max observes.

Before I can answer, Christian follows up on Dan's humor with his own sarcasm. "Not ghosts," he says, "Gods. Pagan gods. Or is it the purely original architecture of this magnificent station stop that has taken away your breath?"

As they walk off to the cars with Mary Jane and Simon, I compose myself well enough to look at the real Valhalla train station. It's actually quite ordinary and hardly noticeable if you don't know what it is, marked largely by the Valhalla Crossing Restaurant. Still the guys have their laugh and, though I do my best to shake off the vision, it takes me a while to lose the overwhelming feeling it gives me. The weirdest part, I realize, is that I'm never scared when I'm there looking at it. Where ever "there" is. Never feel lost or out of place. It's simply a sense of awe, like I always feel that way when I see it, as if I've seen it before. I know this place. It's familiar somehow, despite its numerous oddities.

Before I follow everyone else to the cars, I scan the platform a couple of times to see if I can spot the short,

blond woman again. I don't see her, but maybe this isn't her stop.

In a few minutes, the Valhalla station lies behind us and we're on our way to Mary Jane and Simon's new house. Suffice it to say it's a good-sized house with plenty of walls that need to be painted and yards that need to be landscaped. After a good meal and more drinks than we should probably have, we start taping around the windows and removing outlet covers in preparation for tomorrow's painting marathon.

Mary Jane, of course, has all of the paint and supplies in each room already. Her organizational skills are mind boggling to me. Mine are nothing to sneeze at, so saying hers boggle my mind really speaks to her organizing abilities.

It should be no surprise then that Mary Jane or 'M' as we call her, is the organized one in my group of friends. I have this wonderful vision in my head of her house in complete disarray, laundry molding in the washer, cat hair on the furniture, dirty dishes piling up in the sink... all of that. Honestly, their old apartment in the city always looked like the model home you see in magazines. Spotless. Everything perfectly in place and never gathering an ounce of dust. Even her son is always tidy, despite being only sixteen months old. He has M's brown curly hair, but his dad's brown eyes, and is always dressed in little outfits and the kid never seems to get dirty. Just once I'd like to see him rub his applesauce through his hair or wipe his hands on his overalls. Secretly, I keep hoping to stumble onto M's secret mess somewhere, in the trunk of her car, in one of her closets, under her sink. It never happens. I have spotted quite a few lists at her house though – on the refrigerator (the grocery list), next to the phone, on her desk – each with a single line drawn through the completed chores or acquired items.

I know I should probably do something like that too, but then I might actually accomplish something. On the other hand, if I wrote up a 'to do' list, I could sink into depression

from having all of the things I haven't done, and that I know I should do, right there on a big white page in solid blue letters staring up at me. This isn't where I thought my life would be by now.

When we get out of the cars at the house, M comes up behind me and asks how things are going. She knows how frustrated I am at work and is forever pushing me to find something better. I sigh and assure her that, once I pass the three-year mark in a couple of weeks, I'll look for something else. The company match on my 401(K) will be fully vested at that point and M is happy to hear that I'm thinking about the financial side of things. Before we get too deep into the conversation, I ask her not to spoil the weekend by talking about work. I hate being a minion, just another cog in the wheel like I am at work, and getting away from the City for a couple of days lets me forget about it for a while.



I can see Thor riding up to Bifrost to cross into Ásgard. Still in his bridal gown, but waving his hammer wildly over his head, his joy is obvious. I step closer to the bridge and wave to him. He guides his two goats to land his chariot next to me.

“It worked Heimdall! Just as you said it would. Thrym never knew that I wasn't Freyja. Loki curbed his every suspicion with nonsense about my state being because I had been pining so for him for eight days,” Thor takes a breath.

“Yes, well, Loki is good when it comes to managing nonsense,” I remark glancing at Thor's traveling partner, who still wears his best wedding dress too.

“Say what you like about me Heimdall, but my quick thinking assured the return of the greatest weapon the gods possess,” Loki retorts. “And I did volunteer to accompany Thor on his trip.”

I look at him. We both know that, Loki being Loki, saw an opportunity to make himself look good in the eyes of the gods, so he jumped at the chance to go with Thor to confront Thrym. He minds not that he had to wear women's clothing.

Why should he? This shape-shifter has turned himself into everything imaginable, including a mare that became impregnated by a stallion and gave birth to an eight-legged horse that he gifted to Odin.

“And it was I who borrowed Freyja’s falcon cloak and searched for the thief. Were it not for me, we would not have known who took the hammer,” Loki adds, building up his own image.

“You went looking for Mjölnir to prove you weren’t the one who took it. It was also you who was ready to marry off Freyja to that wretched giant simply because he requested it in exchange for returning Thor’s hammer,” I remind him, then turn back to Thor and grin broadly, “I am glad it worked and Mjölnir is returned to its rightful owner.”

“I wish you could have been there when Thrym laid Mjölnir in my lap. I grabbed it and crushed his skull before he had any idea what was happening. How dare he sneak into my sleeping chamber and take my hammer. He paid with his life and that of every giant who came to his wedding,” Thor is as excited as a small child.

“The Aesir will be happy and relieved that you have it back from that crook,” I say. “Especially Freyja.”

Thor reaches behind his neck and unclasps her necklace, then hands it to me, “Will you give this back to her and thank her for me? I want to go and tell father the good news, so that he can announce it to the rest of Ásgard.”

“Of course,” I hold out my hand to take the necklace.

Thor grabs the reins, then looks at me one last time, “Thank you Heimdall. You are a good friend. I owe you one.”

“Next time I need a storm whipped up, I will let you know,” I chuckle as I watch them ride off to share the good news with Odin.



My hand is clutched tight when I wake up in the morning. I release it with a deep breath and sit up in bed. There’s nothing there now, but I felt the necklace when Thor

dropped it into my hand or Heimdall's hand. It was heavier than I expected, but it shimmered just as brightly as it had when Freyja first got it. I take in another deep breath and rub my empty hands on my face and through my hair. I try to calm myself down, reason out what I just witnessed. The first thing that comes to mind is the woman from the train.

'As if Thor would produce such a show for the likes of harmless miscreants like them,' she had said matter-of-factly. Then, I think of the last thing I say, I mean Heimdall says, in the dream, 'Next time I need a storm whipped up, I will let you know.'

"What's wrong with me?" I ask out loud. "This is insane."

My exclamation causes Perri and Julie, with whom I share a room, to stir.

Groggily, Perri looks down at me from the bed they share and asks, "What's going on? What time is it?"

"Too early," Julie replies, pulling her pillow over her head so that only the ends of her long black hair hang out from under it.

Perri sits up, her spiky blond hair giving her an extra inch or so of height. Concern fills her round face, "Are you feeling okay, Stacy? You're as white as a sheet."

"That's not funny," I reply without even thinking, still trying to shake off my night of jarringly realistic encounters.

At this, Julie sits up too, "I don't think she intended it to be funny." She looks at me and concurs with Perri when she sees my body physically shaking.

"I'm fine," I try to make this bold-faced lie seem true. "Just a bad dream. I'm going to take a shower."

"Good," Julie responds, "then Perri and I can go back to sleep."

In a single fluid movement, they lie back down as if nothing happened. I stumble to the bathroom for a shower. Once the hot water begins falling over my body, I relax and my mind opens to the dream I just had. Then, I think, again, of the woman on the train. She told me a lot about Thor and why he created yesterday's storm – to create time, a delay in

time. In my dream, Thor said he owed me one and I said I'd let him know if I need a storm whipped up. I wonder for a moment if there's a link between the two. Before long though, the feeling of the hot water pouring down my back washes away everything except the sensation of its warmth.



By the time I finish showering, I've pushed the memory of last night's dream into the back corners of my mind, though not out of sight. It loiters in the shadows, waiting for the moment to present itself again and carry me back to Ásgard.

When I step out of the bathroom, I hear my friends starting to move around downstairs. They're up early— well, early for a holiday weekend – and ready to dive into a rainbow of muted paint colors while M makes breakfast. No painting for the pregnant lady. We won't allow it, no matter how low the VOCs in the paint are. Besides, she's a far better cook than any of the rest of us. While we wait for our breakfast, we spend an hour largely painting each other as much as we paint the walls. Of course, we play tic-tac-toe on the walls with paint; we make smiley faces; the juveniles, I mean guys, paint some profanities on the walls which send them into hysterics and make the girls roll their eyes and cover it up.

After breakfast, we return to our assigned tasks. The remnants of Thor and Heimdall's conversation, largely forgotten, I go into the master suite to start painting. The room is ready for me to begin. It's taped around all the edges, outlet covers removed and the bedroom set pushed to the center of the room and covered in big tarps. I grab a can of paint and a stirring stick and walk over to the window on the opposite wall. I open the paint can, but before I start painting, I glance out the window into the back yard, expecting to see Christian, Simon, and Dan laying sod back there. That isn't what I see.

Out of this window, I see a meadow of thick grass and wildflowers. There's a woman, a beautiful woman, likely

the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, walking through it. She looks so familiar, yet I can't place her. Low in her right hand, she holds a shield, with the etching of a wild boar on it, and she clutches the necklace around her neck with her left. Her hair is sort of reddish blond and long and it bounces with her footsteps. The bottom of her dress is feathery and flowing, just around her knees. I don't know where she's going, but she's focused intensely inside herself as she wanders through the field. There are jagged, snow-topped mountains behind her with low sweeping nearly treeless valleys between and I recognize them. They're so familiar, but I can't name them. The look in her glowing green eyes tells me that she's off to get herself into trouble. As I've sworn to protect her, I move toward the door to follow her.

Of course, I'm not where she is. I'm in Mary Jane's bedroom and her backyard isn't a meadow with mountains in the background. When I turn to go after this beautiful woman, my foot catches the edge of the paint tray and I lose my balance. Luckily, there's no paint in the tray, but the lid is off the paint can and, as I begin to fall, my thumb catches my necklace and breaks it, sending it flying through the air and directly into the open can of paint. Without thinking, I submerge my hand into the light blue liquid to save my broken necklace. The second my hand is in the paint, I realize what I've done and let go a sigh. Slowly, I pull out my hand and wipe as much paint as possible back into the can. I replace the lid as hastily as I wipe off the paint, and head downstairs to wash off my necklace and blue hand. All the while, I'm freaking out about the vision I had and the way it made me feel. How could I know that beautiful woman and why on Earth would I think I'm sworn to protect her?

I head into the mud room to clean up and Julie and Christian are standing there when I walk in.

"What happened to you?" they ask in unison.

"I tripped."

“And fell hand-first into the paint?” Julie stares at my hand.

I’m embarrassed, but there’s no easy explanation for this, so I tell them what happened, avoiding the reason why, while I rinse my hand and broken necklace. As I knew they would, they crack up laughing. But the worst part comes when they ask how I managed to trip in the first place – the ‘why’. How do I tell them it was because I was going to chase after a beautiful imaginary woman that I’m sworn to protect? A woman who looked so familiar to me, but I can’t recall her name? A woman who was walking through a meadow in M and Simon’s backyard?

“I don’t know.” I lie and still look like a fool. I grab Julie’s arm and tug her out the door. “Come on. I need to get some air.”

Julie is the planner among my friends. When someone mentions getting together to do something different from our usual ventures, Julie goes into planning mode. Most times, she will tell us what the theme for the night is, where we’re meeting, what we can expect to pay, and even makes suggestions about appropriate attire. The latter is quite annoying really, especially since I found out she brings her “theme clothes” to work with her. The rest of us just don’t care enough. If it’s a weeknight, it’s business attire and, on Fridays, it’s business casual. We manage somehow to always disappoint Julie with our lack of forethought on the matter, because, clearly, the evening cannot be enjoyed thoroughly unless we’re all in costume together. There was one time, a couple of years ago, when Julie turned 30, that we did a murder mystery party to celebrate her birthday. She loved that we all came in character – costumes and all – for the event and decorated my apartment like the brothel where the murder happens. We even got a costume for her and she didn’t give the tiniest impression that she minded, though she mentioned to me a few days later that her costume shoes were from the wrong decade. At least they fit and matched the rest of the outfit. Earlier this year, she was quite pleased when Chalmers, one of the owners of the Hall,

a local bar where we hang out, asked her to design the jerseys for our softball team.

“You’re going to be called ‘the Great Halls’,” she informed us two days later. “Your jerseys will be purple, the color of royalty, and there will be a gold crown on the left breast.”

In medieval times, the hall was the central room of palaces; it’s where most of the action in the house occurred. Designing the jerseys made her feel better, since she isn’t going to play on the team. She claims she’s theatre, not athletics.

She and I walk aimlessly, paying no attention to where we’re going or where we’ve been. At some point I realize that, although we’re talking to each other, we’re having two completely different conversations, each of us talking very intensely about our chosen topic and hardly listening to what the other is saying. She’s going on about Christian fighting with his latest girlfriend, while I’m breaking down and telling her about what I saw when we arrived at Valhalla Station yesterday. She’s usually a good listener and, although she isn’t really listening to me now, I realize it may be for the best, as I think I just need to get this off my chest and I’ll be able to forget about it.

“I’m so glad you pulled me out of there. Honestly,” her voice is exacerbated, “if I had to listen to Christian any longer going on about what an annoyance she is, I would have used the painting tape to cover his mouth.”

‘She’ is Christian’s latest girlfriend, Lei. ‘She’ is also a woman I never cared for and, so really don’t care that they’re fighting.

“Yeah, interesting. Now that we’re out here,” I say wanting desperately to change the subject, “there’s something that I want to tell you and it’s going to sound a bit crazy, but I want you to hear me out. Maybe if I get it off my chest, I’ll be able to let it go.”

Ignoring my introduction, Julie says, “He’s going to break up with her, ya know? I don’t know why he didn’t do it before we left to come up here. No, the ‘ball-less wonder’

caves and tells her he'll call her when he gets back so she will stop yelling and crying."

"When we got off the train, I saw this very weird building," I describe it in great detail, recalling it as vividly as if I'm still gazing at it from the platform. Julie chimes in occasionally, acknowledging things that "seem weird" and wondering "why would a goat be on top of a building?"

Once we agree that we've gotten everything off our chests we need to, we decide to head back to Mary Jane's and finish our painting. Of course, by this point, we've wandered around for so long without paying attention to anything that we're sort of lost. We stop. She asks which way we should go. I have no idea. I look around the street. A few houses down, there's a neon sign in one of the house windows. It's near the corner, so we go that way and hope to get to the business district. Valhalla is not that big, so we can't be too lost. The sign in the window turns out to be for a tarot card reader. Bright and blinking.

"This is the business district. We came through here from the train station," I realize.

"We should have brought our cell phones, then we could've just called someone to come and get us."

Ignoring her comment, I pull her around the corner and glance down the street. "The business district is that way, so we want to go this way."

"Are you sure you know where you're going?" she asks unsure of her footsteps.

"A few blocks up here, then we go right," I say dragging her along.

As we make our right turn, two houses down on the other side of the street Simon and Dan are in the front yard laying sod. Dan looks like a ragged homeless person next to Simon, who is about six inches taller than he is, clean shaven, and hardly breaking a sweat. In contrast, Dan has a thick five o'clock shadow and looks as if he could use a shower and haircut. Julie passes me an incredulous look, smiles, and gives me a high five, then bounds down the street toward the house.

“We were beginning to wonder about you two,” Simon comments, standing at the edge of the lawn admiring his handy work.

“We were just getting some fresh air,” Julie says passing me a quick look. “Where’s everyone else?”

“Inside taking apart the plumbing,” Dan says as Simon hammers an elbow into his side to quiet him.

I look at Simon and wait for an explanation.

He sighs, “Christian was washing out some paint brushes and knocked your necklace down the drain.”

Julie heads into the house pulling me behind her to see if the necklace can be saved. It cannot; my necklace is lost, rinsed down the drain. Christian feels awful, but I assure him it’s not a big deal, the necklace was broken anyway. I don’t mention that I had planned to get a new chain for Thor’s hammer. What’s the point? I can’t do it now. Actually, all I’m hoping for is not to see Thor or any other Norse gods again.

CHAPTER 2

One hundred leagues before the stranger arrives, I see him approaching. The cloudy, snowy weather does not impede my sight in the least. The winter flakes are oddly pleasant, moistening my skin with each touch, while laying a blanket of white across our kingdom to lighten the darkness that comes with the season. Its regular companion, the wind, seems to be on hiatus today. The air is calm and life in Ásgard is quiet. Still, as I watch this stranger approach, I feel uncomfortable. There is something I don't trust about him.

He rides at a steady pace, his deep black steed trotting him smoothly over the ground. Before he makes it to Bifrost Bridge, I can see the dark circles under his eyes, the stringy hair hanging out from under his hat. Despite an enormous cloak draped over him, he looks small, but his size belies his confidence.

When he reaches me, he bellows, "I wish to speak to the gods."

I chuckle at him and offer him a friendly, but cautious smile, "And what is it that you have to say that is so important you wish to do so in front of the gods of Ásgard?"

"While I respect you highly, Heimdall, I will make my offer only to all the gods and goddesses," he replies lifting his chin slightly higher in the air.

"Very well," I nod, suspicious, but willing to give him an audience, "follow me. I will lead you to Fensalir, where many of the gods and goddesses are assembled. Lund," I call to my guard at Himinbjörg, "send Fyl to gather the gods at Frigg's Hall."

Lund nods, so I know things will be taken care of. I turn back to the stranger, take the reins of his horse and lead him across the Plain of Ida to Frigg's Hall in Gladsheim. Within minutes of our arrival, the gods and goddesses file into the hall and take their seats. I tell the stranger to wait by the door, then make my way to Allfather to tell him the man's request.

“I do not trust him Odin,” I warn Allfather. “He has a secret.”

“If you do not trust him, why did you assemble us to hear his plea?” Odin demands.

“I want to hear what he has to say, just to be sure,” I explain.

“Very well. Bring him to the front,” Odin commands.

I walk back to the door, where the stranger waits, holding his cloak in his arms. His appearance will not help his cause. He is haggard and small in a room full of beautiful gods and goddesses, all well-groomed and vibrant. It is good that the sky is dark and the fires not very bright. This will mask his scrawny stature. I hand his cloak to one of Frigg’s servants.

“I will take you to the front. You will wait for Odin to ask you to speak. You will state your idea, then remain silent while the gods deliberate, speaking only when a question is addressed to you. Is that clear?” I ask taking him by his bony arm.

“It is clear. Thank you, Heimdall,” he bows his head in respect.

“What is it you wish to offer the gods?” Odin asks coolly, eyeing the stranger with the same suspicion I have.

“Allfather, it has been a long time since the great war between the Vanir and Aesir ended, yet your fortress wall remains in shambles. I have come to fix it for you and make it better. When I am done, Ásgard will have the greatest wall in the nine worlds. It will be taller and stronger than before, to protect the gods from all jotun tribes,” the confidence in his voice rings loud and clear.

Murmurs rise in the Hall at his proclamation. While Odin raises a hand to silence everyone, Frigg, smiles at the stranger and inquires, “And my good man, what would be your reward for such an impressive feat?”

“In eighteen months, I will give you this new wall and, in return for my craftsmanship, you will give me Freyja for my bride,” he replies without any quiver.

Hearing this, Freyja, looks at me with horror in her eyes. All around the hall, gods and goddesses are shouting, condemning the idea, outraged and laughing at the absurdity of the stranger.

Before Odin can reject his ridiculous suggestion, the stranger adds, “The sun and moon as well.”

At this, Odin bursts into laughter, “Impossible!”

“Wait, Odin,” Loki stands. “We should not dismiss this offer out of hand. He has made a good point; the wall has not been repaired and no one among us has stepped forward to take on the task.”

“Are you insane, Loki?” Týr asks along with similar comments and questions from others.

I step forward, wanting to break Loki’s neck for suggesting that we consider this request, but I walk up to the stranger and suggest to Odin that we have our guest wait outside while we deliberate his offer. When Odin nods, I escort the stranger to the door and another of Frigg’s servants leads him outside. Once the door closes, I turn to Odin without hesitation, “We cannot accept this offer.”

“Why so quick to dismiss it, sentry?” Loki’s usual glint appears in his eyes, the subtle sign of the trouble brewing in his mind.

“Because I am not willing to sacrifice the sun, the moon, and Freyja for a wall,” my voice rises as I move toward him, ready for confrontation, but Thor grabs my arm.

“Silly, narrow-thinking Heimdall,” Loki shakes his head. “We need not accept the offer he made. What if we give him a counter offer, say six months instead of eighteen?”

“What good would that do?” Thor wonders. “He could never finish the wall in six months.”

“No,” Loki’s evil grin curls up on his lying mouth, “but if Freyja is the prize being offered for finishing, he will try his best to complete it, so we could end up with more than half the wall built without losing anything.”

I glance to Odin and see him smiling too. My eyes move to Frigg. Surely Allfather’s wife will speak up in support of Freyja. She will say Freyja is not an object to be

gambled away. She looks from me to Freyja and clears her throat, “You have no way to guarantee he will not finish the wall. What if he brings in help? What if he finishes sooner than six months and wants even more than his already outrageous request?”

Odin pats his wife’s hand, “Do not worry my darling. We will tell him six months and he must do the work without help from anyone.”

“Odin, what are you saying?” I step forward and continue, uncensored, “You are actually going to consider this cretin’s idea? Are you so petty that you would risk Freyja, the sun, and the moon to get half a wall built for free? You have more riches than you could ever hope to use. You could hire an honest, hard-working crew to build a proper wall.”

I cross a line and Odin’s spear against my throat tells everyone that his decision has been made and no one gets to question it. “Bring in our guest,” he commands me, not lowering his spear until I agree and step back out of reach.

Incredibly, the man agrees to the terms, negotiating only the use of his horse to help him. Odin decrees that the stranger will begin tomorrow, on the first day of winter and finish by the first day of summer. As the gods and goddesses file out, Loki’s maniacal smile filling his face, they are stunned into disbelief. Freyja is in tears, and I am wishing I would have turned away the stranger when I had the chance. I should have trusted my instincts, because my instincts know now that this is only the beginning of Loki’s latest scheme.



I wake up sighing heavily and realizing that the Norse gods aren’t going away. Tucking thoughts of them safely into the darkest recesses of my mind, I set out to make Sunday a productive day. We finish painting and put the rooms back together; the front and back yards are landscaped and things will start to bloom in the coming weeks; and I’m

in complete denial about the new guests who have taken over my dreams.

On Monday, we head back to the City after lunch. I sit down on the train and my mind begins to wander, not to the ride up here and the woman who regaled me with Norse god stories. Foolishly, I believe that one night without the Norse gods has erased them from my mind. So, this train ride, I spend thinking about the house I just left and how M and Simon seem to be living their dream. They have everything they want. They're happy and looking forward to the arrival of their second child in about four months. I'm happy for them, but seeing their joy gives me pause and cause to examine my own life. I don't want what they have, at least not right now, but I'm not happy either and I contemplate what it is that I *do* want.

I mean I'm 31 and while I believe that the crap job I have now can't be what I'm destined to do, I haven't got a clue about what I do want to do with my life. Well, I guess that's not entirely true. I know I want to write; I just don't know what I want to write or for whom I want to write it. I'm not sure where things went awry, but this isn't the life I had planned after college. Sadly, whatever that image was, that plan, that goal, it's withered into a poorly painted impressionist's picture so blurry that no part of it can be discerned.

I have my own place, a small apartment in Hoboken, New Jersey, across the Hudson River from New York City. It's nothing fancy, but it's a lot more space than I could get on the island of Manhattan for the same price. And, it's a little out of the fray of the city. When I come home at night, I can actually relax.

My job isn't great; let's face it, it sucks! It pays the bills and not much more. Still, I know what they expect from me at work. I think the problem is that what they expect isn't much. I tell my friends I'm looking for something else, but the truth is, I'm looking only for the perfect next thing. That may prove to be the impediment to my forward movement. After all, I have no idea what the perfect next thing is, so I

don't know what to look for. My current job was supposed to be perfect. It met all the criteria for a perfect job when I started. I began with such high hopes for advancing up the old corporate ladder. I saw myself moving quickly from my entry level position to a middle management spot. Goodness knows there were three or four options waiting for me right out of the gate. Simple process: I do good work and get promoted to one of them, right? With the exception of two minor title changes and a few cost of living raises, not really. After nearly three years, I'm doing, more or less, the exact same job I was doing when I walked through the door on my first day. The biggest differences are that there's absolutely no excitement in it anymore and I don't try to surpass the basic expectations of the position any longer. I haven't become lazy. It's worse. I've become complacent, uncaring, drained. I go in, do my thing (or, more appropriately, their thing) for them and leave.

I've been in New York City for almost ten years, moving here right after college. I was a history major at UCLA. Don't ask me why it wasn't English or Journalism or some other writing program; it just wasn't. I liked history in high school, so it seemed a natural step when I entered college. I love the experience I had at UCLA and am grateful for everything I learned. The problem is that I studied history, because I enjoy it, not because I have any clue about what I want to do with it as a career. So, I fall into the 'climbing the corporate ladder' routine that so many of us succumb to for no other reason than we do not know what else to do. The '9-5' lifestyle with overtime as needed or demanded by our superiors is engrained in our heads throughout our lives. Why? We don't get paid for it, or at least, I don't. I'm a 'salaried' employee. 9-5 plus. Though I never wanted it, I don't know what else to do and, perhaps because it's drained the life out of me, I don't investigate what else there is. Sometimes it's like floating out at sea, caught in the doldrums. I'm still, motionless, not really moving forward or backward, but lulling myself into stagnation so deep I can't see a way out. It's a vicious cycle,

because, as I drift deeper into the doldrums, the way out, any way out, becomes harder and harder to discern.

The train ride back to the City is far less eventful than the ride to Valhalla had been. No thunderstorms, no talk of Thor and no woman sitting with me to regale me with stories of him and his fellow gods and goddesses of Ásgard.

This trip Perri sits next to me. Perri is not so easy to define. In one sense, she's like me. I don't think she has figured out what she wants to be when she grows up either. Unlike me however, every few months, she has a new job doing something completely different than the one she was doing just prior. What baffles me is how she gets hired. In the three years that I've known her, she's had seven completely unrelated jobs. She doesn't even have a college degree. She lives by the seat of her pants and I have no idea how she can make ends meet, let alone set aside anything for retirement. She says she doesn't want to work a '9-5' job, but she's a long-time member in the '9-5 club', having had a slew of those jobs. Maybe that's why they never last. At least, she seems to be happy no matter what her employment situation is.

"Where did you disappear to with Julie on Saturday? You guys were gone for over an hour," Perri says out of the blue.

I don't want to remember my reasons for going off with Julie; I've worked very hard to suppress those Norse visions.

"They were off looking for Wiccans," Dan leans in with a chuckle in his voice and a grand smile across his face.

"Oh god," I shrug as if that topic is so outdated. "You're not still on about that are you?"

"Of course I am. I figure I have about a week's worth of remarks about it actually," he rests his chin on the back of our seat and continues explaining what Wiccans are as if Perri and I are two little school girls.

Ah, Dan. Dan is from England and Perri rolls her eyes every time Dan mentions having a row (argument) with someone or when he calls someone a prat or git. I think Dan

and Perri would make a wonderful couple, except they seem to prefer annoying each other to liking one another.

Anyway, like Perri, Dan has had multiple jobs over the years; by my counting, five in the seven years he's been here. His have all been semi-related though, except for the waiter job he took two years ago. It lasted only a few months. He said he took it to make a little extra money, which may have been true, but I don't know which other job he had at the same time that would constitute the waiter job providing 'extra' money so much as money in general.

While Dan continues with his list of sarcastic remarks about my introduction to Norse Mythology, Christian comes over and sits down next to him.

"What's going on?"

"Dan is entertaining himself at my expense," I say.

"I'm trying to help. I grew up with this stuff, ya know?"

"Oh right, in England," Perri begins annoyed, "where they still believe in fairies and sprites. Why *not* throw witches into the mix?"

"And what was so interesting before I leaned in with my humor? What were the two of you talking about?" he asks.

"I just asked her why she and Julie were gone so long," Perri's reply sets her up for another bite of Dan's wit.

"That had to be a thrilling conversation. I'm going to guess, because they were talking and got lost. Sorry I interrupted that spell-binding chat," Dan sits back in his seat and waves his hand between Perri and me. "Continue."

Perri makes a flicking motion in his direction with her fingers.

Christian ignores them both and turns to me, "I just wanted to apologize, again, for washing your necklace down the drain. I know how much you liked it."

"Don't worry about it. It's gone. It was broken anyway, thanks to my graceful trip and fall into the paint," I explain.

"I never heard how you fell in the first place," Perri alludes to getting the full story.

“She’s hexed,” Dan mumbles from his seat. “That’s why she left with Julie. They went to try to find the Norse witch from the train to remove the curse.”

“Really, Dan, it’s not funny anymore. Let it go,” Perri passes him a dirty look.

“Besides Dan, if you truly knew anything about Wiccans, you would know that they don’t worship Norse gods or goddesses. They have their own set to worship,” I add, then wonder if it’s actually true; I can’t confirm it.

As if to assure the end of the Wiccan conversation, Perri asks, again, how I fell.

I think, for a moment, about diverting the reason to Julie, grateful that she’s not sitting with us, so she can’t give up my secret. I could say she wanted to get away from Christian complaining about his girlfriend, but I can tell he feels bad enough about my necklace that I decide to give Dan an answer that will far outshine his week’s worth of Wiccan jokes. I decide to tell the truth, but tell it in such a way that even Dan will be left speechless.

“No, Dan’s right. Well, partially right. We didn’t leave to go looking for the woman on the train, we went to find the beautiful woman I saw when I looked out of M’s bedroom window. You see, I went into their bedroom to start painting. Before I started, I looked out the window, expecting to see Dan and Simon in the backyard doing the landscaping work. But, what I saw instead was the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. She had long strawberry blond hair that curled up at the ends and lay on her skin like a blanket of silk. She was walking through this meadow of thick grass and wildflowers and they tickled her legs right at the bottom of the feathery, flowing dress she wore. With each step, everything bounced like a melody singing to the world about her beauty. Her eyes glimmered like perfectly cut emeralds. The reason I tripped on the paint tray was because I wanted her. I’m sworn to protect her, but I want more than that. I was running to the door to follow her, to keep her safe. And that’s when I tripped back into this world and my hand fell into the paint,” I’m breathless, but manage

one last, “God, I wanted her. If you’d have seen her, you’d have wanted her too. She was a goddess.”

As my story concludes, Perri and Christian burst into laughter and Dan raises his arms in surrender. I, however, am hit again with the reality of the other world I’ve been popping in and out of all weekend. As soon as I hear myself joke that she’s a goddess, I know that, in fact, she is. She’s Freyja, the goddess of love, sex, and seidr, which is witchcraft. I know further that everything I told Dan was true. I’m sworn to protect her, but I want her. Everyone who lays eyes on her wants her. That’s why the stranger, who offered to rebuild Ásgard’s wall wants her for his wife. But, I resist every temptation she unknowingly presents, because I promised I would protect her.

Moments later, after the guys lean back and continue to entertain themselves over the story I told them, Perri leans in and whispers, “If you want to find out about that Norse whatever stuff, there has to be someone in the City who can help you.”

“What do you mean?” I say grateful that she doesn’t pick up on the defensive tone that leaps out of my voice.

“Like a professor, someone who studies it,” she explains. “I mean, that woman on the train cannot possibly be the only person in the five boroughs who knows something about Norse gods.”

“You know, I may look into that,” I breathe as the train pulls into Grand Central.

As we exit the train, Julie walks up behind me and questions, “Any goats on the roof?”

Not this time, but it’s all just starting.