

Ca Loena

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VIKING

VALHALLA RISING MC

ANDI RHODES

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BOOK ONE

ANDI RHODES

BLUE JOURNEY PUBLISHING

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I am so excited to bring you the Valhalla Rising MC series! This series has been a year in the making. When the idea struck me, I became obsessed. It made it difficult to focus on much else, but I managed to persevere. And then I got to writing Viking and Makayla's story. It's like nothing I've written before, and I hope you love it as much as I do.

This series is loosely based on the mythological Valhalla. If you are familiar with the mythology, you'll recognize some concepts that are similar, but you'll also notice that I put a creative fictional spin on everything.

Now, if you're ready, grab a box of tissues, a bottle of wine, and buckle up!

Much love,

Andi

Humans are taught that death is the end, that it's their soul's final curtain call. But for the members of Valhalla Rising MC, death is only the beginning.

Viking...

I never asked to be one of the chosen, never dreamed a place like Valhalla existed. Yet that's exactly where I ended up when a Valkyrie plucked me from obscurity. I'm respected here, celebrated as a fallen warrior, but none of it lessens my vicious need for revenge or fills the hollow parts of me.

As president of Valhalla Rising MC, it's my job to make sure the Warrior Code of Conduct is adhered to and that Odin's orders are carried out. But that becomes infinitely more difficult when I'm sent back to the land of the living for a mission that puts me in direct contact with a Legacy. And then there's the matter of the beautiful woman my soul seems to recognize.

I know I can complete my mission, but I'm not as convinced I'll be able to do it without breaking all the rules.

Makayla...

As a doctoral candidate in mythological studies, I'm doing my thesis on Valhalla. I've always been obsessed with tales and legends that get passed down through the generations. I love my life, my little corner of the world I've carved out for myself. So much so that I'm immersed in history to the point that I'm oblivious to the danger lurking in the present.

When my space is invaded by a man who insists that I've got things all wrong, my existence shifts into something unrecognizable. Where there was once order and understanding, there's now chaos and uncertainty. And I don't hate it... because he's there.

I know he has rules to follow, but will they hinder his ability to keep me safe? Or will he break them for me... for us?

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WARRIOR CODE OF CONDUCT

1. No warrior may engage in fighting outside of the fighting arena
2. Do not incite violence
3. No stealing
4. No betting on fights in the arena
5. Never raise a weapon on anyone when their back is turned
6. Never strike a Valkyrie
7. Cannot make contact with any blood relative
8. Cannot reveal your true self to anyone
9. Cannot tell anyone why you're in the human world
10. Do not engage with a Legacy
11. When a mission is complete, return to Valhalla immediately
12. Do not become emotionally involved with a human
13. Physical relations between a Warrior and a human are forbidden
14. Warriors and Valkyries may engage in sexual acts but must not become emotionally involved

GLOSSARY

- **Legacy:** A direct descendant of a person involved and/or responsible for a Warrior's death
- **Odin:** Creator and ruler of Valhalla
- **Valhalla:** Warrior heaven
- **Valkyrie:** A handmaiden to Odin, collects Warriors from the sight of their death and escorts them to Valhalla
- **Warrior:** A brave or experienced fighter, any person who died bravely in battle or protecting others at the expense of themselves
- **Warrior Code of Conduct:** A set of rules that Warriors must follow in Valhalla and in the human world

PROLOGUE

VIKING

987 AD...

“Welcome to Valhalla.”

The bright white light shrouding me slowly disappears, revealing surroundings that are lush, beautiful, and... foreign. I turn in circles, desperately searching for anything familiar, for Mea.

“She’s not here.”

I freeze, my muscles tensing. The voice is distinctly female, but I don’t recognize it. Nor do I see anyone it could possibly belong to. I’m alone.

Did the Vikings strike me in the head?

A shimmer dances before me, and a woman materializes out of thin air. I jump back, startled and not at all sure I’m not going insane.

“Who are you?” I demand. “Where am I? Where’s Mea?”

“So many questions,” the woman says with a smile before tilting her head. “Although, that’s to be expected.” She takes a step toward me, but I back away from her. “Come now, Leif. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“How do you know my name?”

Exasperated, she sighs. “My name is Kára. I’m the Valkyrie Odin tasked with escorting you to Valhalla.”

What?!

“But that would mean—”

“You’re dead.”

Her matter-of-fact tone sends my mind spiraling, and bile rises up the back of my throat as a memory slams into me.

“I’m not ready, Leif.”

I stare at my wife, doing my best to tune out the chaos surrounding us. The Vikings have been raiding villages for what feels like forever, and we’re running out of time.

“Mea,” I scold with a finger to my lips. “Quiet.”

She purses her lips, and a tear slips down her freckled cheek. Mea is the kindest human I know, the violence coming our way so beyond her comprehension. We’ve only been married for a few months, but it’s looking more and more like the family we both want isn’t going to happen.

“Maybe they’ll tire before they reach us,” Mea whispers.

Screams from our fellow villagers penetrate the walls of our home, and my wife shifts closer to me.

As I wrap an arm around her shoulders, I tighten my grip on the ax I’m holding and force a smile. “Maybe.”

Time passes in a blur. Mea prays, murmuring pleas and offering bargains. I listen to her words, but they’re of little comfort.

My ax offers comfort. It always offers comfort. But it’s also a stark reminder that we’re grossly outnumbered and likely to die by daybreak.

I’m not ready to die. I’m not afraid of death, but I don’t know too many people who embrace the idea of ceasing to exist.

But I’ll embrace it wholeheartedly if it means Mea gets to live.

An orange glow from a torch passes by the window, and I know we have only minutes left. I turn to face Mea and cup her chin.

“I love you,” I tell her. “I’ve loved you since the moment I saw you, and I will love you for eternity.”

Mea shakes her head. “No, Leif. Stop talking like that. We’re not going to die.”

“We are,” I insist. “Or at least, I am.” I press a kiss to her lips. “Tell me you love me.”

“I do, Leif. I love you so much.”

“Rehashing your last moments with your wife won’t change anything,” Kára says, pulling me out of the nightmare in my brain.

“What happened to Mea? The Vikings…”

Kára’s face falls, and she scrunches her nose. “I’m sorry, Leif.”

I take a step toward the Valkyrie, raising my ax above my head. It didn’t register that I’m still holding it until this very moment.

Kára doesn’t even have the decency to look afraid. Instead, she shakes her head and tsks me like a mother would a child.

“Leif, you can’t kill me,” she says calmly. “But even if you could, it wouldn’t change anything.”

Swinging the ax so the sharp edge slices through her skull, I roar with fury when her entire being shimmers before she reappears.

“I can see why Odin chose you,” she says.

“Chose me?”

“You do know who Odin is, don’t you?”

“Of course, I do,” I snap.

“And you’ve heard talk of Valhalla?”

I nod.

“Thousands of men would die to be standing where you’re standing right now.” She arches her brow. “Quite literally.”

“Then why me?”

“Because only warriors of a certain, shall we say, caliber, are chosen.” Kára steps toward me. “You don’t remember, but you fought to the death to protect Mea. You selflessly gave your life to save hers.”

“But I didn’t save her.”

“No, you didn’t,” she agrees. “But you tried. And that counts for something.”

This is all so confusing. I should be honored that Odin selected me. Hell, Mea would be proud if she knew. But all I am is sad.

I want Mea. Only Mea.

“And you shall have her.”

“How did you—”

“It’s my job to know what you’re thinking. It eases the transition.”

“You said I shall have her. How is that possible?”

“Leif, one thing at a time. Let’s get you settled into your new role, and then, if Odin permits, I’ll give you more information on how to get your Mea back.”

“My new role?”

“You’re a warrior of Valhalla now. You serve Odin, not your own interests.” She grabs my hand and leads me through the greenery. “Come, we have much to discuss.”

MAKAYLA

PRESENT DAY...

“Are you sure about this?”

I feel like I'm sitting in front of a firing squad and not Marsha, my academic advisor. From the moment I met her my freshman year of undergrad, she's been more like a friend than mentor. I've come to respect and value her opinion. She and I have had many conversations about my education over the years, and this is the first time my nerves are getting the better of me.

“There's no other option,” I tell her.

“Makayla, there are always other options.” Marsha smiles warmly. She reminds me a little of my mother, and the thought sends a sharp pang through my chest. “And I can tell by the look on your face that you couldn't care less what those options are.”

The woman knows me well.

“I can't do anything else, Marsha. I just...” I shrug. “Can't.”

She leans over her desk and rests her elbows on the oak top. “I figured. You know, I've never seen someone as passionate about Valhalla as you are.”

And you probably never will.

For as long as I can remember, I've sought out the stories about the men and women who are my ancestors. My mom used to tell me about them at bedtime. She always joked that

the only way she was able to get me to sleep as a baby was to start talking about lores and legends.

Fuck, I miss my mom.

“I get it from—”

“Your mom, I know.”

I huff out a laugh. “Look, I know there are other mythologies I could focus on, but I don’t want to. Valhalla is where my heart is, where it’ll always be.”

Marsha eyes me thoughtfully, and I know what’s coming.

“Are you still having those dreams?”

An image flashes in my mind of a man and woman huddled in a shack. They’re both clearly frightened, but just like when I see them in my sleep, all I feel is a sense of calm. I chalk it up to the stories I heard as a child. The emotions they conjure are comfort and contentment, not fear, and that’s what sticks with me as an adult.

“It’s been a while.”

“What’s a while?”

I tilt my head. “Are you asking as my friend or as my advisor?”

“Does it matter?”

“You tell me.”

Marsha shakes her head and grins. “Stubborn as always. No, Makayla, it doesn’t matter. And I’m asking as your friend.”

I stare at her a moment before responding. “It’s been a few months.”

“That explains it then.”

“Explains what?”

“The light in your eyes has dimmed since classes started back up. Usually, you’re chomping at the bit to get back into the library or classroom, but this year... It’s been different.”

Because this is the first academic year since my mother died.

It's on the tip of my tongue to apologize, but I don't. I know I've been cranky. My biggest supporter, my best friend, is gone.

"Give me a little more time. I'm just trying to find my bearings without Mom, ya know?"

"I know. I just don't want you to lose focus. You're so close."

"I won't. Promise."

Marsha pushes up from her chair. "Good. Now, get out of here so I can grade some papers." She rolls her eyes. "What I wouldn't give to have all my students be as dedicated as you."

"Not everyone can be perfect," I joke as I make my way to the door. "See ya in class next week."

I make my way through the halls of the building that's like a second home to me. Once outside, I cross the courtyard and head to the library. Working on my doctorate takes a lot of time, but not quite as much as my undergrad and master's. And school definitely doesn't pay the bills.

Hence, the library. I've worked there my entire college career, and I'll miss it when I'm finally done. But it only pays enough to cover my gas and phone bill, so I also work at a club downtown on nights and weekends. Between my paychecks and tips, the rest of my bills are paid, and then some.



Two days later...

"THESE CHILDISH FANTASIES HAVE TO STOP."

I stir the leftover spaghetti and roll my eyes. My dad called ten minutes ago, as he always does on Sunday, and our conversation is the same as it always is. He questions my

sanity for choosing mythology, specifically Valhalla, as my doctoral path of study, and I remind him that I'm an adult and can make my own decisions.

"Dad, they aren't fantasies," I counter. "Besides, it's *my* life. Why can't you just be proud of me?"

"Honey, I am proud of you," he insists. "But I worry."

"About what?"

Dad heaves a sigh, and I imagine him sitting in his recliner with the football game muted on the television.

"Makayla, how are you going to make a living with this degree? You're spending thousands of dollars for an education that will only take you so far."

"And it's my money to spend."

I don't get it. My dad wants me to be happy, and this makes me happy. It's not like my passion for mythology is anything new.

"You're right, it is," he concedes. "And you still didn't answer my question."

Twirling noodles around my fork, I settle on my couch and pull my feet under me. "I can teach, pass on my knowledge to others who love mythology as much as I do."

He chuckles, the first real chuckle I've heard from him since Mom died. "I don't think there's anyone as passionate about Valhalla as you." *Did he and Marsha plan these conversations or what?* "Well, maybe Odin, but that's it."

"So, you do listen!"

"Of course, I listen. You're my baby girl. Just because I don't always agree with your decisions doesn't mean I don't care about them."

I've been his 'baby girl' since I was, well, a baby. At twenty-seven, I'm definitely not a baby, but it still makes me feel all warm and fuzzy when he calls me that.

My phone beeps, and I pull it away from my ear to look at the screen. Jeff's name sends my nerves buzzing, and not in a

good way.

“Hey, Dad, I gotta take another call,” I tell him. “I love you.”

“Love you too.”

I press the button to switch to the other line. “Jeff, what’s up?”

“Mak, I thought we agreed you weren’t going to use Valhalla as your thesis topic,” he complains.

“First of all, it’s Makayla,” I say, not understanding why he insists on calling me that ridiculous nickname. “And second, I never agreed to anything.”

“But we talked about it!”

“Yeah, we did. And if you take your head out of your ass for a minute, you’d probably remember that I never agreed to anything.”

“But we can’t use the same topic,” he insists hotly.

Leaning forward, I set my half-eaten leftovers on the coffee table. “Why not?”

“How will I stand out if we both use Valhalla?”

“Jeff, I can’t worry about your thesis when I have my own to do.” I grab the remote and turn on the TV. “Besides, it’s not a competition. Now, was there anything else you needed? Because I’ve got shit to do.”

“You’re such a bitch,” he snarls before disconnecting the call.

I grin as I toss my cell onto the cushion next to me.

At least he didn’t call me Mak.

VIKING

“C’mon, old man. Gimme all ya got.”

In the fighting arena, I bounce around the cage on the balls of my feet, making sure to keep Inferno in my line of sight. As the VP of Valhalla Rising MC, he’s proven to be an invaluable asset to me. He’s also my best friend and a giant pain in my ass.

“Who you calling old?” I counter.

Inferno smirks as he lifts his hand and orange flames flicker to life in his palm. “You’ve got a few hundred years on me.”

Lifting my ax above my head, I chuckle. “A few hundred years and numerous lifetimes of experience.” With a roar, I swing my weapon down as hard as I can, slicing the iron through the fire and Inferno’s hand, severing three of his fingers. “How’s that for old?” I ask when his eyes blaze with fury.

“Dammit, Viking,” he fumes as he lunges for me, his one good hand going around my throat.

Pushing me against the edge of the cage, he squeezes, and all I do is grin. “You know I’m already dead, right?”

Inferno’s hardened features contort in pain, and my grin slips. I know that look.

The fingers I severed are regenerating, and the agony it causes rivals that of death. Or, at least, I imagine it does. I don’t remember the pain of my demise.

Many, many years ago, I asked Odin why we don't experience pain when

wounded but we do as our bodies heal themselves. He laughed at me and explained that it's his way of making sure his warriors stay humble.

"Fuck Odin for this," Inferno grumbles and pushes away from me.

"Don't let him hear you say that."

"Too late."

Inferno and I spin around and see the God himself standing just beyond the bars of the cage. Odin has his arms crossed over his chest, and if looks could kill, we'd both be dead... again.

"Inferno, one of these days, you'll learn that there is a method to my madness," he says to my VP, and then he turns to me. "And next time I'm disrespected like that, the punishment will come out of your hide. Understood?"

I nod curtly. "Understood."

If I had blood flowing in my veins, it'd be boiling. Odin may have chosen me to serve him, saving me from whatever fate my death would bring, but the one thing he hasn't done is kept his word.

And from what I remember, a man's word is all he has.

Odin is aware of my distaste for him, but he also knows I will remain loyal because there's no other option.

"Who's on duty while you two are in here sparing?"

"Acid and Reaper," Inferno responds, referring to our Sergeant at Arms and Enforcer.

"You might want to have a conversation with them," Odin says, gritting his teeth. "Things are getting unruly in Academy Hall."

"Valhalla Rising MC is not responsible for Academy Hall," I remind him. "The valkyries handle everything there."

Academy Hall is the part of Valhalla where all the newly deceased are housed. For the first six months of their forever after, they remain there where they are trained and evaluated. And if they're one of the lucky few, they're recruited to become prospects for the club.

Stiff with rage, Odin bellows, "You'll handle what I tell you to handle, Viking."

The hair on my arms stands on end. Why Odin gave me the name of the people responsible for my death, I don't know, but every time I hear him speak it, I want to scream down all the heavens around me.

Next to me, Inferno snarls, but with a glare from our God, he takes a step back and bows his head.

"We'll go check on Academy Hall, as well as Acid and Reaper," I finally capitulate.

"See that you do."

Odin turns to walk through the trees surrounding the cage and disappears into a field of green.

"Why do you always give in to him?" Inferno asks quietly once we're alone again.

And you shall have her.

"Because he owes me something, and I intend to collect," I snap.

"Lemme guess... You're not gonna tell me what that something is."

I turn around and face my VP. "No, I am not."

Inferno shakes his head. "Fine," he mutters as he stalks to the gate. "Let's get going before the big man decides to come back."

I'm surprised when Inferno doesn't push for more information. He doesn't typically give in this easily. But I'm not about to give up my secrets. Not now, not ever, not even to him.

As we walk through Valhalla, the beauty of it no longer having an effect on me, I try to conjure up an image of my Mea. For the first few hundred years, her face would haunt every second, but it's getting harder and harder to remember her.

Passing the Mess Hall, I quickly scan the area for Acid and Reaper, but don't spot them. If I know my men, they're likely off riding over the hills and valleys, blowing off some steam. It was a long night. Every night is a long night. Being dead means we don't sleep, so every minute, every hour, every day bleeds into the next.

When we reach Academy Hall, Herja, the oldest of the Valkyries, is standing guard at the entrance.

"What are you doing here, Viking?" she demands. "This isn't your territory."

I paste a smile on my face. "I'm aware. But Odin said things were getting rowdy and asked us to check it out."

"It's nothing we can't handle."

Herja doesn't like me. When I first arrived in Valhalla, I quickly identified her as the Valkyrie to watch out for, and that hasn't changed. In fact, since Odin formed the MC to act as a sort of police force for the heavens, Herja has held a grudge.

"I don't doubt that," I tell her. "But orders are orders, as you know."

Herja narrows her gaze before stepping aside to let Inferno and me pass. She might not like me, but she loves Odin and never questions an order from him.

After entering Academy Hall, the problem is immediately clear. Several newcomers are standing in a half circle and shouting taunts and encouragement as Kára attempts to coral a newbie, but he's fighting her tooth and nail.

"What the fuck is going on here?" I shout, bringing the action and noise to a grinding halt.

When Kára turns to face me, the new warrior takes advantage of her distraction and lands a right hook to her

cheek. The shock on his face when she doesn't fall to the ground is comical.

“Inferno, handle him,” I order. “He's not cut out for Valhalla.”

Inferno starts to walk toward the man who's wearing a cut with motorcycle club patches that I don't recognize.

“No!”

Mist, another Valkyrie, materializes and stops Inferno in his tracks with a hand on his arm. There was a time when people appearing out of nowhere would have startled me, but now it's more annoying than anything.

“Mist, he's done,” I say. “He broke one of the cardinal rules in the Warrior Code of Conduct.”

I point to the Warrior Code of Conduct, the thick lettering etched into the gold walls of Academy Hall. The words I've come to live by seem to mock me.

Warrior Code of Conduct

- 1. No warrior may engage in fighting outside of the fighting arena**
- 2. Do not incite violence**
- 3. No stealing**
- 4. No betting on fights in the arena**
- 5. Never raise a weapon on anyone when their back is turned**
- 6. Never strike a Valkyrie**
- 7. Cannot make contact with any blood relative**
- 8. Cannot reveal your true self to anyone**
- 9. Cannot tell anyone why you're in the human world**
- 10. Do not engage with a Legacy**
- 11. When a mission is complete, return to Valhalla immediately**
- 12. Do not become emotionally involved with a human**
- 13. Physical relations between a Warrior and a human are forbidden**

14. Warriors and Valkyries may engage in sexual acts but must not become emotionally involved

“He doesn’t even know the rules yet,” Mist snaps.

“Regardless, you don’t strike a Valkyrie and get away with it.”

“I seem to recall a certain warrior who tried to split Kára in two when he first arrived.”

I flash back to my death date and chuckle. “Touché.”

“The man is frightened,” Kára says as she darts her eyes between him and me. “Much like you were, Viking. Give him a few days. If he doesn’t come around, we’ll send him to the Fire Pit.”

“Send me home,” the man demands. “I want to go home.”

Staring at him, I see the fear Kára mentioned, the panic. And I remember it like it was yesterday.

“What’s your name?” I ask him, softening my tone.

“Who the fuck are you?” he counters.

I cross my arms over my chest. “I’m the warrior who’ll drag your ass to the pits if you don’t answer the fucking question.”

He glares as if sizing me up. “What’s it to ya?”

“Answers or pit,” I say with exaggerated patience.

He looks around at the other newbies and finds them all taking a step back, no longer interested in witnessing a physical confrontation and distancing themselves from whatever trouble he’s causing. He must realize that he’s on an island by himself because he sighs.

“My name is Jacob,” he finally says when he faces me again. Then he points to a patch on his chest. “But everyone calls me Grump.”

Maybe in the human world they do.

I close the distance between us and thrust out my hand. “Jacob, I’m Viking. Welcome to Valhalla.”

Jacob shakes my hand after several tense seconds. “Why am I here?”

“Because you were chosen.”

“Chosen?” he repeats. “For what? How? I don’t know—”

“Kára will explain everything. But you’ve gotta get your temper under control if you’re to stay here.”

“I don’t want to stay here.”

“No, I don’t suppose you do. But there’s nothing for you to go back to. The life you knew is over.”

“But how?”

I glance at Kára and nod. “Show him.”

A full minute passes before Jacob stumbles backward, and a tear streaks down his tanned cheek.

“I...” He shakes his head. “I was shot?”

“Is that what you saw?” I ask him.

He nods. “I was at a jewelry store, picking out a ring for my old lady. Ya know... so we could make things all legal and shit.” Jacob waves a hand dismissively. “A man in a mask came in to rob the place, and the fucker had a gun. He was aiming at the woman behind the counter, but I jumped in front of her.”

“If that’s what you saw, that’s what happened.”

As a warrior, the only death we’re permitted to see is our own. We can divulge the information to others if we choose, but that’s up to each man.

“Jacob,” Kára begins. “I know you’re scared, but if you give things a chance, you’ll find that your afterlife isn’t all that much different than your human life was.”

He arches a brow. “How so?”

“I see you’re wearing a cut,” I say before Kára can respond. “You were in a motorcycle club.”

“Yeah, so fucking what,” he growls defensively.

“I’m the president of Valhalla Rising MC. Do well in Academy Hall, and you could earn a spot as a prospect.”

“I already have a club,” Jacob snarls. “Besides, I’m an Enforcer. Why would I wanna be a damn prospect?”

“Dude, you’re dead,” Inferno reminds him. “You’ve got nothing anymore. You *are* nothing.”

Jacob flinches at the bluntness of Inferno’s statement. He bristles, and Kára reaches for his hand. I brace myself for him to lash out, but surprisingly, he doesn’t. Instead, he hesitates for a moment and then settles his palm on hers.

“Come, Jacob,” she says. “I’ll show you around, and then we can begin your training.”

I watch as they walk away, and Mist shimmers before disappearing, leaving me alone with a room full of trainees and Inferno.

“Go find Acid and Reaper,” I order my VP. “Tell them to keep an eye out for a possible escape attempt. I have a feeling Jacob’s gonna be trouble.”

There’s nowhere to escape to, but that doesn’t stop the newbies from trying every once in a while. I couldn’t care less if they leave, but it upsets the natural order of things, and I do care about that.

“Sure thing, Pres.”

Once he’s gone, I face the others. “Get back to your training, all of you.”

There’s a collective groan, but they do my bidding. I turn on my heel and retreat to the entrance.

“They’re all yours, Herja,” I tell the Valkyrie as I stride past her.

“Gee, thanks,” she mutters, and I roll my eyes.

I make my way to my quarters, my mind on Jacob. He very well might be trouble, but he’ll also make a damn good brother if he can keep his shit under control.

MAKAYLA

“Please tell me it’s after midnight.”

I grin at Sarah as she walks into the dressing room after finishing her set. We’ve worked together at Cherry’s Gentlemen’s Club for the past three years, and she’s become like a sister to me.

“It’s after midnight.”

“Liar,” she says as she tosses a set of black and gold pom poms toward her locker.

Chuckling, I shake my head. “You asked for it.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she grumbles. “This is my eighth shift in a row. I’m exhausted.”

Sarah was born with a silver spoon in her mouth, but when she turned twenty-one, she spit it out. According to her, she wanted to make her own way, not feel like she owed her family anything because they buy her obedience.

“I thought you were going to talk to Steve about your hours.”

“I did.” She shrugs. “You know how he is.”

Steve, our boss and owner of Cherry’s, can be a real asshole sometimes.

“Girl, you’ve gotta start standing up for yourself,” I chastise.

“So... Have you narrowed down your thesis topic yet?” she asks, clearly not wanting to discuss herself any longer.

As she changes from her cheerleader costume to her cowgirl ensemble, I apply a generous amount of hairspray to my dark chestnut braids.

Excitement zips through my system, and my heart rate quickens. “Actually, I have.”

Sarah sits on the small stool at the makeup station next to mine and works to put her hair in pigtails. “Well, what is it?”

“Obviously, I’m doing it on Valhalla, but I want to focus on how modern views of death and dying have been formulated ba—”

“Blah, blah, blah. Dumb it down for me,” she teases. “Not all of us have a fancy education.”

I rise from my stool and start toward the door. My set is up next, and Steve doesn’t tolerate any dancer who’s not ready to go on time.

“Basically, I want to research how the myths of Valhalla have shaped the way we think about death in modern times.”

“That sounds...” She scrunches her nose. “Depressing.”

Music pours through the air, signaling that it’s time for me to go. I smile at Sarah before stepping through the doorway.

“Not to me,” I call over my shoulder, and her chuckle follows me down the hall.

It takes a minute for my eyes to adjust to the bright spotlight trained on the stage, but once they do, I’m able to see the small weeknight crowd.

As my body moves to the beat of the song, I do what I always do when I’m on stage: pretend that I’m dancing for the man in my dreams. It helps to settle the nerves that plague me, even after doing this job for several years.

I may be a nerd and feel uncomfortable performing for strangers, but I’m not ashamed of being an exotic dancer. As

long as I don't have to strip down to my birthday suit, I'm happy to have steady work and income.

Besides, it's not like I'll do this forever. Not only do I hate lying to my dad about how I spend my 'free' time, but I'm not in graduate school for nothing.

"Take it off!"

Yeah, not happening.

"Show us your tits, honey!"

Definitely not fucking happening.

Dollar bills are tossed onto the stage by most patrons, but a man sitting at the table to the right of the platform rises from his seat and reaches for my leg. Cherry's might not be the classiest joint, and Steve might not care about how tired we are, but a customer tries to touch one of us dancers, and they're tossed out on their ass.

While I dance, my eyes focus on Brigg, the bouncer, as he stalks across the room and grabs a hold of the man's shirt. He drags the guy away from the stage, dodging flying arms and legs as he goes.

After he shoves him out the door, Brigg turns around and meets my eyes. He winks before returning to his post and watching the remaining customers. I really like Brigg and consider him a good friend, but that's it. He's asked me out several times, but he's simply not my type.

He's not your dream guy, you mean.

When my second song ends, I exit the stage and head back to the dressing room. The leather of my Valkyrie costume is now slick with sweat, and my contacts are making my eyes burn. I can't get back into my normal clothes fast enough.

"How'd it go?" Sarah asks when she spots me.

"Only one tossed out on his ass tonight," I tell her with a rueful chuckle.

"Wasn't it four last week?" I nod, and Sarah laughs. "Things are improving then."

I strip out of my outfit and pull on the jeans I was wearing when I arrived. They're dark and tight and hug my hips. The black tank top with the bright red lips and dangling cherries logo that completes the Cherry's uniform molds to my chest, and my cleavage is on full display. I only dance one set on weeknights, and the rest of my shift is spent behind the bar.

The last few hours go by slowly because we're not all that busy. I fill drinks and absently wash empty glasses as they're left on the bar top. It's almost closing time when Sarah finishes her last dance. Customers have filtered out over the last several hours, and only three remain for the show, none of which are good tippers.

"So, when are you going to close out the night for me?" Steve asks as Sarah walks off stage. "If you were up there, no doubt the place would still be packed."

"Not happening," I reply as I wipe down the bar.

"You already close down Saturday nights," he laments. "What's a few more?"

"Steve, leave her alone."

I turn to see Sarah coming from the dressing room in her street clothes. Her bag is slung over her shoulder, and she has dark circles under her eyes.

Our boss shakes his head and makes his way toward the office, his hands full of today's receipts. He's not a bad guy, but he is all about money, and if he thinks he can make more, he won't let an idea go.

"Bring me the last three receipts after you close down," Steve calls over his shoulder.

An hour later, Brigg is escorting Sarah and me to our cars, and my mind is focused on what I need to get done before class tomorrow.

And maybe, just maybe, if I weren't so in my head, I'd have noticed the man tucked against the building in the shadows, watching my every move with malice in his eyes.

4

ODIN

“It’s time, Sir.”

Without taking my eyes off the pretty woman on the screen, I nod. Kára has been hounding me for several lifetimes to do the right thing, the honorable thing, and up until now, I’ve always found a reason to wait.

The timing wasn’t right, his frame of mind was off, I needed him here in Valhalla.

Viking has made no secret of the fact that he isn’t my biggest fan, and I get it. He feels betrayed and doesn’t understand that everything I do, I do for a reason.

Being a God isn’t easy, and it sometimes comes with making unpopular decisions. I’ve accepted that burden, embraced it really. But the best warrior I’ve ever had will likely start a mutiny if I don’t act soon, especially now that he’s got a full club of brothers at his side.

“Go rally the Valkyries,” I order Kára. “It’s going to take a lot of power to get them all to the human world.”

Her body shimmers before she disappears, no doubt to do my bidding.

For a long time, I thought Viking and Kára would hook up. It happens a lot between a Valkyrie and the warriors they usher into the heavens, but they’ve never been more than great friends.

Because he’s holding onto hope.

Sighing, I move to the chambers outside my office and begin calling for a man I'm going to make very happy.

5

VIKING

“Odin’s looking for you.”

I set the half-eaten boar leg on the long wooden table and turn around to see Demo, our Road Captain, striding through the grand entrance of the Mess Hall. He’s naked, and his hair is a mess which tells me he was with Mist before he was summoned to track me down.

“Been here all morning.”

With zero shame, Demo scratches himself before slinging his leg over the bench and sitting next to me.

“Is there a reason I had to sacrifice my pleasure to track your ass down for him?”

I arch a brow. “Watch your tone, Demo,” I snarl. “I outrank you.”

Demo, short for Demolition, is the newest member of VRMC and the youngest brother. He’s got an insatiable appetite for sex and unless he’s doing work for the club, he can be found in one bed or another.

And seventy-five percent of his time is spent unclothed.

“Gimme a break, Viking,” he mutters. “I was balls deep in Mist when the old man’s voice boomed in my skull. Talk about a boner killer.”

“How have you not fucked your dick off yet?”

“It’s a talent.” Demo grins as he gets to his feet and strokes his cock. “Please go see what Odin wants so I can finish what

I started.”

With those words, he retreats the way he came. It’s still early in the day, so I’m the only one in the Mess Hall. I quickly finish my meal and then go in search of my leader.

“Where the fire pits have you been?” Odin demands when I step through the door to his daily chamber.

“In the Mess Hall.”

“Did you not hear me calling?”

“I didn’t want to waste the fresh boar,” I lie, knowing how he hates when meat is left over.

He stares at me, questions in his eyes, but he doesn’t voice them. Rather, he gets to the reason for his summons.

“I’ve got a mission for you.”

“I’m listening.”

“Follow me,” Odin instructs and turns toward the office he maintains.

The walls are lined with monitors which all display different corners of the world outside of Valhalla. Those of us here are dead, but there are billions of people still going through the motions of everyday life.

I remember what it was like before technological innovation, and I miss those simpler times. Now as I watch the men and women on the screens, they all seem to be in a hurry.

“As much as I prefer the old ways, even I have to admit that technology makes life easier,” Odin comments absently.

“It has its pros and cons.”

As the years passed and more warriors arrived in Valhalla, so did their knowledge, inventions, and experience. Odin resisted change for many decades, but even he couldn’t deny that we needed to keep up with the times despite being a different world.

“Yes, well...” He turns away from the monitors and faces me. “You and your officers are leaving by the end of the day

and returning to the human world.”

Um... what?!

“For a mission?”

“Yes.”

“If it’s in the human world, why can’t the brothers in that chapter handle whatever it is that needs handled?”

Not only is VRMC active in the heavens, but we also have a chapter living among humans. I’m not sure what purpose they serve other than to have people worshipping Odin on all planes of existence.

“Are you questioning your orders?” he barks.

Yes, when they don’t make sense.

“No.” I shake my head. “Just trying to understand. What exactly is the mission?”

“There’s a woman I need you to make contact with,” he explains. “She’s working on a project for school and has chosen Valhalla for the topic.”

“And this is a problem?”

“It is when she’s getting information wrong,” Odin snaps.

“What would you like us to do about it?” I ask, still unclear about what he’s asking of us.

“I want *you* to help her, provide her with correct information. I want you to ensure that any research done or information presented to the world is accurate and keeps Valhalla’s best interests in mind.”

“And the officers?”

“They’re going along to keep you in line.”

“I’m their president. I keep them in line,” I snap.

“Maybe so, but this is a delicate situation, and I want all hands on deck.”

Okay...

“What’s the timeline for this mission?”

I'm not crazy about returning to the human world, especially when I'll have to be in such close contact with a female. It's strictly forbidden for a warrior to have any type of relationship with a human. Besides, there's only one woman I'm interested in, and she's been dead for ages.

"As I said, you'll leave today. Kára and the others will escort all of you to the Ohio transition house, where you will stay for a few days to acclimate to the modern world. Ms. Steinbeck will prepare you as best she can so you don't stick out like a sore thumb. She'll also provide you with the information needed about the woman. When Ms. Steinbeck feels you're ready, you will travel to Indiana to complete the mission."

"Is there a specific cover story we're required to use?"

"I don't particularly care how you do things, just do them."

"Understood."

"Now, get going and round up the troops. Kára will meet you at your quarters in two hours so you'll need to hurry if you're to be ready in time."

Having been dismissed, I make my way out of the office and go in search of Inferno. As VP, he needs to be apprised of the situation immediately.

Unable to find him near the living quarters, I mount my motorcycle and take off down the roads paved in gold. I pass Academy Hall and spot Jacob training with Herja, and I'm glad to see he seems to have come around.

Once I reach the outskirts of Valhalla proper, I open up the throttle and fly through the fields and valleys, my eyes constantly scanning my surroundings for my VP. I also keep alert for guards who patrol the common territory between each of the heavens. They're friendly, but I don't have time to get caught up in their bullshit.

An orange glow appears beyond the trees ahead, and I go in that direction, knowing the source of the light. Dodging branches as I ride, I slow the bike when I have Inferno in my line of sight.

My brother seems to be distracted and doesn't react when I park and walk toward him.

"Yo, Inferno!" I shout to get his attention.

I duck to avoid the ball of fire he launches at me. When I straighten, he's brushing his hands off on his pants and sporting a murderous expression.

"What the fuck, Viking?" he snaps. "Don't sneak up on me like that."

"I didn't sneak."

"Whatever," he mutters. "Did you need something?"

"Odin's sending us to the human world."

Inferno arches a brow. "Why?"

"To make sure he's still being worshiped." I shrug. "Hell, I don't know. He says our mission is to make sure some chick doesn't fuck up details about Valhalla for a school project."

"That sounds... horrible."

"It sounds like glorified babysitting."

"Why do we all have to go?"

"Just the officers are going, and honestly, I'm not sure," I admit. "Something's up."

Inferno stares off into the distance and links his hands behind his head. "Viking, I really don't want to go back there," he says quietly.

"And you think I do?"

My VP shrugs.

"Listen, none of us want to go back there, but orders are orders. The sooner we get there and get shit done, the sooner we can come home."

Inferno sighs with a nod. "Yeah, fine. When do we leave?"

"Just under two hours," I inform him. "Help me round the others up."

We both mount our bikes and head back to Valhalla proper. It doesn't take long to find Acid, Reaper, and Demo, and none of them are happy about the mission either.

With less than ten minutes to spare, the five of us are gathered in my quarters. No one says a word as we wait for Kára and the other Valkyries to arrive, but I know our thoughts are likely very similar.

What in the fuck is Odin getting us into?

MAKAYLA

“You must come with me.”

Wildly shaking my head, I stretch an arm out in front of me to keep some distance between me and the woman who appeared out of nowhere. One minute two Vikings were holding me down while a third assaulted me and the next, they disappeared.

My heart had been hammering against my ribcage, but now... nothing.

Odd.

“Where’s my husband?” I shriek, frantically searching my surroundings for him.

“His whereabouts do not matter right now,” the woman states calmly.

A little too calmly.

“Of course, they matter.” When she stops trying to move closer to me, I lower my arm.

“And you shall have him. But not here, not now.”

A shock registers in my chest, as if I’ve been struck by lightning, and my body becomes weightless. The bright light around me dims, and arms wrap around me. I try to struggle, but it’s useless. Even though I’m not being held tight, I have no strength to fight the woman off.

“It’s all going to be okay,” she croons, but her voice sounds far away. “You’ll see, M—”

I bolt upright, sweat soaking my t-shirt and causing it to stick to my skin. After kicking my legs free from the sheets, I swing them over the edge of the mattress and stand. Adrenaline courses through my veins, and my heartbeat throbs in my ears. Pain radiates through my body, and my arms ache in the same spot where the woman in my dream was being held by evil men.

Bile rises up the back of my throat, and I race for the bathroom.

I'm on my knees in front of the toilet just in the nick of time. As I wrench the contents of my stomach, I can't help but wonder why the dream I've had for years has suddenly turned into a nightmare.

When the heaving subsides, I scoot toward the vanity and grab a hold of the edge to pull myself to my feet. I turn on the cold water before splashing some on my face and try to shake off the dregs of sleep. Once I feel somewhat normal, I return to my bed and crawl under the covers.

For the next several hours, I toss and turn, unable to find any sense of rest. As the sun peeks through the blinds, I quit trying. I get out of bed and make my way to the kitchen to start a pot of coffee. After the night I've had, I'm gonna need it.

I guzzle a sufficient amount of caffeine and then take a quick shower. I have class and a shift at the library, not to mention the mountain of research I need to pour through for my thesis.

As soon as I step outside, a cold breeze whips my hair, and I lower my head against the wind. I rush to the car and climb into the driver's seat, and it's not until I straighten and turn the key in the ignition that I notice the piece of white paper tucked under my windshield wiper.

I roll down the window and stretch to grab it, shivering as I do. The paper is folded in half and when I open it, I frown.

You'll regret this.

Twisting in my seat, I search for someone who could have left the note. It's not signed, and the three simple words don't give me any indication as to the author. There isn't anyone around, suspicious or otherwise, so I decide that whoever left it obviously got the wrong car. I crumple it up and toss it on the passenger side floor.

"People are stupid," I mutter as I back out of the driveway.

The drive to campus is short, and traffic is minimal. Once I reach my class, I take one of the front seats and wait for the lecture to begin. There are twenty-five of us in my particular program, and all are in this session.

"You working later today, Mak?"

I turn to face Jeff as he slips into the chair next to me. "How many times do I have to tell you, it's—"

"Makayla," he mutters. "Yeah, yeah."

Facing forward again, I sigh. "I'm on at three, why?"

Jeff shrugs. "No reason."

Before I have a chance to question him further, our professor walks in. Class goes smoothly and by the time it ends, I've got several pages of notes written. When we're dismissed, I quickly gather my things and hurry out of the room so I don't get stuck talking with Jeff.

I spend the time between class and my shift at the library, my head buried in books on Vikings and Valhalla. A sense of calm washes over me while I'm engrossed in such a beloved subject, and when my phone beeps letting me know that I've gotta work in a few minutes, I sigh.

"I was wondering if you were ever going to stop reading."

I chuckle at Debbie, one of the librarians, when I join her behind the counter. "I learned my lesson," I say. "I set an alarm on my phone today, otherwise I'd never stop."

She unlocks the cabinet under the desk and grabs her purse. "Well, you're here, and that means I can go home. I've gotta pick up the kiddos from school."

Debbie is a single mother of three little girls, and I have no idea how she does it. She works here at the library most days and third shift at a twenty-four-hour diner where all the college kids like to hang out when they're drunk.

"Have a good night," I tell her.

"I will." She grins. "I've got the night off for once so we're going to watch a movie and eat popcorn."

"Sounds like fun."

"If I can stay awake, it will be."

After Debbie leaves, I work on scanning books that have been returned and putting them back on the shelves in their proper place. Once that's done, I return to my research in between assisting students when they need my help.

"You don't quit, do you?"

I lift my head and see Jeff leaning over the counter.

Great, just what I need.

"Can I help you with something?"

He shakes his head. "Nah. Just thought I'd stop in and say 'hi'."

"Jeff, the last time we talked before today, you called me a bitch and hung up on me," I remind him. "Now you're just stopping by for a friendly visit? I don't get it."

"Yeah, sorry about that. I was having a bad day."

"You were..." Now it's my turn to shake my head. "Having a bad day doesn't give you the right to be a jerk."

"You're right, it doesn't. Which is why I'm apologizing."

He seems genuine, and for a moment, I wonder if I've got him all wrong. Maybe he isn't such a dick. Maybe there's more at play behind the scenes, so to speak.

Signing, I give a cut nod. "Fine. Apology accepted."

Jeff releases a breath as if relieved. "Good."

"So, is that all you wanted?"

“Actually, no.” He straightens, and his friendly demeanor slips slightly. “I wanted to talk to you about our thesis topics.”

“Jeff, I’m not changing mine.”

The good guy facade falls away completely. “C’mon, Mak. I need you to back off on Valhalla.”

“Why is this so important to you?” I ask, knowing there’s no way I’m going to back down.

“It just is.”

I narrow my eyes. “Is this about that job at the museum in Ireland?”

Every few years, the museum hires one doctoral graduate from the United States to work for them on special projects. The position is always temporary, but it’s the perfect way to start using a degree and get experience. This year just happens to be the year they’re hiring, and the project is on Valhalla.

“Maybe.”

“Look, they’re going to hire the best person for the job. Maybe instead of harassing me to change my topic, you could spend your time putting in the work and make yourself the best person.”

What I don’t tell him is I’m not his competition. I’d love the job, but I can’t leave my dad to move to a new country. Not so soon after losing Mom.

“Why are you being such a bitch about this?”

“I’m not, Jeff. I’m doing what’s best for me. Nothing you can say will change my mind.”

Jeff stomps away, muttering under his breath as he goes. I can’t make out what he’s saying, but I have no doubt it’s nothing kind.

That didn’t last long.

VIKING

“Wakey, wakey.”

Groaning, I roll over and open my eyes to see Acid leaning against a wall with his arms crossed over his chest and a smirk on his face. I flip him off as I glance around at my surroundings.

“Was I sleeping?” I ask.

Acid pushes away from the wall and crosses the small room toward me. “We all slept. I don’t remember a fucking thing after the Valkyries shimmered us down here.”

“So we made it? To Ohio?”

A short woman with gray hair bustles into the room carrying a stack of clothes. “You made it, indeed,” she comments as she drops the bundle on the bed at my feet. “Now get up and get dressed. We have a lot to do.”

Before I can react, she’s gone, and I’m left to stare at Acid.

“Ms. Steinbeck,” he supplies.

“Right, well...”

“Breakfast is on the table. I suggest you do what she says and get down there if you’re wanting any food. Everyone else is up and chowing down.”

Acid leaves, and I drop back down onto the pillow with a grunt. It figures that the first time I’ve slept in many, many

years would also be the one time I don't have the luxury of enjoying it.

I climb out of bed and rifle through the clothes Ms. Steinbeck provided. I'm naked, as it's easier to transition that way, so I pull on a pair of boxer briefs. Next, I grab a pair of jeans, a soft black shirt, and the cut with the Valhalla Rising MC patch on the back. Feeling a bit more normal, I go in search of the others.

It takes me less than a minute to find the kitchen where Acid, Inferno, Reaper, and Demo are sitting around a table shoveling food into their mouths. Ms. Steinbeck is flitting around the room and making sure that my brothers have any and everything they need.

"Sit, sit," she says when she sees me. "I'll fill a plate for you."

I stare at her for a moment, not used to being told what to do by anyone other than Odin, but she doesn't seem the least bit phased by my hesitation. After setting my breakfast in front of the only remaining chair, Ms. Steinbeck returns to the counter and busies herself cleaning up.

"Aren't you going to eat?" I ask her.

"Don't you worry about me," she replies absently.

"I... okay." I take a seat. "Thank you."

"You've gotta try this bacon," Inferno says, pointing at the meat on my plate. "Fuck, I've missed bacon."

"We eat like kings back home," Reaper comments after swallowing. "How could you possibly miss anything?"

"I miss a lot of shit," Inferno snaps.

"Not me. I hated my life." Reaper grins. "Death and the afterlife is better."

"That's enough!"

We all freeze at Ms. Steinbeck's shout. She strides to the table, her hands on her hips, and purses her lips.

“You aren’t in Valhalla anymore so any talk of death and the afterlife must cease,” she instructs. After glancing at the clock on the wall, she huffs out a breath. “You have ten minutes to finish your breakfast. Then we need to get to work.”

All conversation stops as we fill our bellies. Reaper is right... We do eat like kings at home, but Ms. Steinbeck is a pretty damn good cook.

Once our plates are empty, Ms. Steinbeck carries them away, one by one. The table is cleared, and we all pitch in to help her finish cleaning. Ten minutes later, the room is spotless, and we’re ordered into the living room.

“Congratulations. You’ve all completed your first lesson,” Ms. Steinbeck beams.

“All we did was eat,” Acid states matter-of-factly.

“You ate a meal like civilized humans rather than warriors who are used to stuffing your faces with fresh boar. You’d be surprised how many times warriors fail at something as simple as eating.”

“Seriously?” I ask, my tone disbelieving.

“Yes, Viking, seriously.”

“I guess we’re just smarter than everyone else,” Demo comments with a cheeky grin.

“We’ll see about that.” Ms. Steinbeck hands each of us a folder. “In there, you’ll find all the information you need to successfully complete your mission.”

“I have to ensure some chick gets details about Valhalla correct,” I say as I open the packet and start scanning the documents. When I was alive, I didn’t know how to read but over time, I learned. “How hard could it possibly be?”

Ms. Steinbeck smiles, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. “Yes, well...” She flips open the front flap of her folder. “The *chick* you refer to is Makayla Elizabeth Ashbridge. She’s twenty-seven years old and currently working on her doctorate in mythological studies at a university in Indiana. Ma—”

“You mean she’s not a child?” Inferno demands.

“Of course, she’s not a child.” Ms. Steinbeck glances from him to me and back again, an odd expression on her face. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

“Odin said...” I press my lips closed and recall the words my god actually spoke. *She’s working on a project for school.* “He never gave me her age.”

“What very little information he gave you is irrelevant. Never make assumptions, Viking.” She arches a defined brow. “You of all people should know that.”

My anger spikes, and I shoot up from the couch. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Sit down,” she snaps.

“Listen, lady,” I begin. “I don’t take orders from anyone, especially not some little old lady from Ohio.”

Without warning, Ms. Steinbeck shimmers, her entire being disappearing for a moment only to return inches from me.

Aw, shit.

“I’m not some *little old lady from Ohio*,” she says, her tone overly sweet. “I’m a—”

“Valkyrie,” Acid mutters.

“Valkyrie,” she repeats. “And as such, I command respect.” Her eyes narrow as she keeps her gaze focused on me. “As for what I meant... Do you like it when someone assumes you’re a Viking because of your name? Or that you’re a Neanderthal because you carry an ax?”

“I... No.”

She turns to take in the others. “Never make assumptions. Do I make myself clear?” Murmurs of agreement fill the room. “Good. Now, as Odin explained, albeit poorly, your task is to ensure that the information Ms. Ashbridge includes in her final research paper is accurate.”

“How are we supposed to do that?” Demo asks.

Ms. Steinbeck moves away from me so she can clearly face all of us at once. “How you do it is up to you, but there are a few rules you must adhere to.”

“The Warrior Code,” I supply.

“Yes, that,” she agrees. “Remember, you are not to tell anyone, including Ms. Ashbridge, who you really are. She must not know that the lot of you are really dead.” Ms. Steinbeck takes a breath. “In order to aid you with that, you’ve been given a *tune-up*, shall we say, so that you now sleep. I will provide each of you with a cell phone, as well as cash and credit cards so that you can buy whatever it is you may need while you’re here.”

“What about our bikes?” Reaper asks.

Ms. Steinbeck grins. “Ah, yes, the motorcycles. You’ll find five Harleys parked in the garage for your use here in the human world. They’ve been customized to fit each of you, and I have no doubt you’ll be able to sort out which one belongs to whom.”

“That’s all fine and dandy,” Inferno begins. “But simply giving us the basics isn’t going to help us blend in. What’s our story? What *can* we tell her?”

“The VRMC is already in place in the United States, so use that. Make contact with them, see what they’ve got their hands in, and join them. I’ve already purchased a building that will act as your clubhouse while you’re in Indiana, and I’ve put out a call to have the US chapter join you there in a few days. Working with them will help you blend into society beyond Ms. Ashbridge.”

“Wait a second,” I demand. “This sounded like a simple mission, but joining the other VRMC, getting involved in human affairs... I figured we’d be here for a few days, not weeks or even months.”

Ms. Steinbeck chuckles. “Assumptions, my dear. They’ll get you into trouble.”

What the actual fuck?

“It wasn’t that big a leap,” Inferno snaps. “Why do I get the feeling that there’s more at play here than this Makayla bitch?”

“The five of you will leave tomorrow,” Ms. Steinbeck says, ignoring Inferno’s question. “In your folders, you’ll find the address of the clubhouse, as well as all other pertinent information about Makayla Elizabeth Ashbridge. You should use the rest of the day to study the info, memorize it, and get your heads on straight because I will be burning the packets before you leave. It wouldn’t do anyone any good for dossiers about a woman to be found.” Ms. Steinbeck turns to leave, but halts with a snap of her fingers. “Oh, I almost forgot... You must remember, if you should come into contact with a Legacy, do not engage them or attempt any sort of revenge. And never, *ever*, use your gifts in front of humans.”

With that, she bustles from the room, leaving my brothers and me alone. Silence fills the air for a moment, but it’s quickly broken by all of us talking at once.

“Shut up!” I bellow, raising my hand to quiet them. They press their lips together and stare at me expectantly. “One at a time.” I turn to Inferno. “VP, you first.”

“This is total bullshit,” he barks.

“You think I don’t know that?” Running my hand through my hair, I heave a sigh. “Look, the sooner we get through this, the sooner we can go home. I’m just as thrilled as the rest of you, but we’re here to do a job, so let’s do it.”

“Pres, why would she warn us about engaging a Legacy?” Acid asks. “I know that’s part of our code, but it’s like she’s expecting us to come in contact with one.”

“I don’t give a fuck about the code,” Reaper spits out. “If I see a descendant of the person who ended my life, I’m going to engage.”

“I thought you were glad to die?” I ask sarcastically.

Reaper smirks. “I didn’t say I was gonna hurt them. Shit, I’ll thank the poor bastard and shake his hand.” He shrugs. “Or her. Yeah, that could be interesting.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about the whole Legacy thing,” I say, despite doing exactly that. “The chances of running into one are extremely low.”

“Famous last words,” Acid mutters.

“Let’s just get this over with, shall we?”

“Sure thing, Pres,” Demo says.

“Take the day and study,” I order. “I don’t want any of you fucking this up or dragging the mission out.”

“You got it.”

“Dismissed.”

They all file out of the room, and I flop down onto the couch, my folder of information gripped in my hand. Flipping through the pages, I search for a picture of Makayla Elizabeth Ashbridge, but there isn’t one. Instead, all I find is what Ms. Steinbeck already told us and a physical description: petite, long brown hair, slim, and wears glasses most of the time.

Leaning back against the cushions, I close my eyes and try to conjure an image of a woman fitting that description. Unfortunately, all I come up with is a blurry likeness of Mea.

And not for the first time, I wonder...

What the fuck has Odin gotten us into?

MAKAYLA

“You’re up next.”

I nod absently at Claire, one of the other dancers at Cherry’s as I stare at my reflection in the mirror. My contacts are burning tonight, but I can’t put my glasses on while I dance. They ruin the image, according to Steve.

Satisfied that I look the part, I push up from the stool and make my way out of the dressing room and down the hall to the back of the stage. Sarah is finishing up her first number of the night, and judging by the hoots and hollers coming from the main bar area, the customers love her.

The music fades, and I smooth my hands down the bodice of my Valkyrie costume. When Sarah steps into the hall where I’m waiting, she rolls her eyes.

“They’re full of piss and vinegar tonight,” she says with a small huff of laughter as she holds up a wad of cash. “But they seem loose with their money, so...” Sarah shrugs.

“Or you’re just that good.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere.”

My music starts, and I walk up the steps to the stage. “You know you’re not my type,” I tease over my shoulder.

The bright spotlights seem more blinding than usual, and I chalk it up to my sensitive eyes. Silently cursing Steve and society for unrealistic expectations of beauty, I begin to move my body to the beat.

Can't curse them when you're out here capitalizing on your looks.

Sarah was right, the crowd is full of it tonight, but I don't mind. It means I'll take home a decent amount of cash, which will go straight into my safe at home until I need it for something.

Swinging around the pole that's center stage, I tune out the catcalls and filthy demands for me to take my clothes off. By the time my two songs are over, my skin is slick with sweat, and I'm more than ready to return to the dressing room and rest until I close out the night.

But before I can make my way behind the curtain, my attention is drawn to the entrance when the door swings open. As if being manipulated like a puppet on a string, I stare at the five men who stride in like they own the place, my gaze hyper-focused on the one leading the group.

Holy smokes!

I command my feet to move, but remain frozen. And like he's connected to me by some invisible tether, the man swings his head in my direction, and even in the dim lighting, I can see his entire body tense.

Oblivious to the rest of the room, I don't hear the music begin to pump through the speakers or see Claire step onto the stage. I'm transfixed on the man in leather and denim, only to be startled when a hand settles on my arm.

"What are you doing?" Claire whispers harshly. "You're done, Makayla."

Shaking my head and blinking several times, I'm finally able to force my muscles to move, and I look at Claire.

"What?"

"You're set is over. I'm on now."

"Oh, um... right. Sorry."

I scurry off the stage and rush to the dressing room where I flop down on the stool.

What the hell just happened?

My heart thumps wildly against my ribs, and my mind races. Images dance around in my skull of the man and woman in my dreams, but I can't fully make out their faces. I've never been able to identify them, but it's something I've accepted... until now.

Why are they in my head?

My arms flail when I'm tapped on the shoulder, and I jump to my feet and spin around. Sarah is standing right there, her eyes wide and her hands in the air.

"Whoa," she murmurs. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

I don't fucking know.

"I..." I shake my head. "Nothing. You scared me, that's all."

"I've been calling your name for a few minutes, but you were totally spaced out." Sarah frowns as she lowers her arms. "Are you sure you're okay? You look like you've seen a ghost."

I force a smile. "I'm fine. Promise."

She eyes me skeptically, but doesn't push. "Okay. Well, can you help me cover the bar for a bit? Sasha went home sick."

"Sure." *So much for resting.* "Just let me change real quick."

Five minutes later, I'm behind the bar. Cherry's is packed, and I find myself scanning the room for the man who came in earlier. When I turn my head to look in the other direction, I squeak in surprise because he's standing right there looking too damn good for my peace of mind.

"Can I get a Jack and Coke?"

Whipping my head toward another customer, it's all I can do not to groan at his intrusion. "What?"

"Jack and Coke," he repeats. "Please."

“Comin’ right up.”

It takes me less than a minute to mix the drink, and I swipe the ten-dollar bill he sets on the bar. After putting the cost of the beverage in the till, I slide the remaining money into my pocket for my tip.

I try to busy myself with other customers, but when the music shifts and another dancer takes the stage, they all migrate back to the tables. All except... him.

Taking a deep breath, I force myself to face him. I’m the freaking bartender and can’t ignore his presence forever.

“What can I get you?” I ask him.

He doesn’t say anything as he stares at me, his eyes assessing. It’s as if he’s looking right through my flesh and bones, way deep down to my heart and soul.

An involuntary shiver skates down my spine, and my stomach flip-flops.

“Dude, the lady asked you a question,” another man says as he smacks him on the arm. They’re both wearing the same leather vests, but that’s where the similarities end.

My man—*I did not seriously just think that*—has longer hair, and the sides of his head are shaved. His dark blond locks are slicked back, and his biceps bulge beneath a black long-sleeved t-shirt. He’s resting his hands on the bar, and his knuckles are covered in tattoos.

I’d love to see where else he has ink.

“Fuckin’ fire pits,” the second man grumbles before facing me and grinning. “We’ll both have a beer, darlin’.”

I nod absently and reach into the coolers under the bar to grab two long-neck bottles. After twisting the caps off, I hand them to the second man.

“Thanks,” he says, wrapping his fingers around the green frosty glass. “I’m Acid, and the silent creep over here is Viking.” Acid nods to his friend.

“I’m Maka—” I press my lips together, his words finally penetrating the fog of lust swirling around me. “Wait... Did you say your name is Acid?”

He chuckles. “I did.”

“That’s...” I scrunch my nose. “... unique.”

“I’m Viking.”

Acid throws his head back and laughs while I smile at the way Viking just dives right into the conversation.

“I’m Makayla. It’s nice to meet you.”

Viking grabs his beer and tips it to his lips. I watch his throat bob as he swallows, and heat swirls low in my belly.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

I’m not normally so affected by men. Don’t get me wrong, I’m no Virgin Mary, but it’s been a hot minute since I’ve let myself get involved with anyone. Typically, I’m more interested in research books than boys, but apparently, Viking is the exception.

“I haven’t seen you in here before,” I comment. “Are you new to the area? Just passing through?”

Seemingly over his shyness, Viking grins, and I swear my panties dampen.

“We just got to town a few weeks ago,” he tells me. “We started a chapter of our MC here.”

“MC?”

“Motorcycle club,” a third man supplies as he steps between Viking and Acid and slings his arm around their shoulders. “I’m Inferno, and the two behind me are Demo and Reaper.”

I glance past him and see two more men, but they’re facing the stage and completely engrossed in Tempe’s dancing skills, oblivious to anything going on around them. With the way they’re turned, I’m able to make out the patches on the back of their vests.

Valhalla Rising MC.

I've never met bikers before. All five of them appear dangerous, and I've no doubt they can be as deadly as any television show portrays, but there's something about Viking that draws me to him, danger be damned.

"Hey, Makayla."

I turn and see Sarah walking toward me. "What's up?"

She grabs my arm and tugs me away from the men. "You should stay away from them," she whispers harshly.

My brows shoot up. "Why?"

"They're bikers, and that only means one thing... trouble."

"Have you met them before?"

"No. But I've met their kind."

"Their kind?"

"Yeah, their kind. Hardened men who don't give a shit about anything but their motorcycles and the open road."

Looking over my shoulder, I try to see them from her point of view, but I can't.

"They seem nice to me."

"Just stay away from them, okay? I don't want to see you get hurt."

Yeah, I don't think I can do that.

VIKING

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

I take my eyes off of Makayla’s ass and look at Acid. He’s glaring at me like I’ve got two heads, and I’m pretty sure I know why.

Riding here on the black custom Harley with gold waves painted on the gas tank gave me plenty of time to think about how I would approach Makayla. I walked in with a plan. And then it went to shit.

“Nothing.”

“Brother, you couldn’t even speak when you saw her. It was creepy.”

He’s not wrong, and that pisses me off. Makayla is a mission, so why was it like getting struck by lightning when I first saw her?

“Does she look familiar to you?” I ask my Sergeant at Arms.

“Yeah, she looks exactly like the description Ms. Steinbeck gave us.”

“No, I mean...” I shake my head. How the fuck do I explain that she reminds me of someone? That seeing Makayla was like seeing home for the first time in thousands of years? “Never mind.”

When we arrived in the area two days ago, we took time to familiarize ourselves with the clubhouse and the town. I’ve

watched civilization change and evolve on the screens in Odin's office back home, but I wasn't prepared to see it all in person.

Everything is different. *Everything.*

Despite knowing better, I was expecting to see similar villages like the one I grew up in.

Like the one I died in.

I definitely didn't expect to be sucker punched in the soul when I walked into Cherry's Gentlemen's Club. My surroundings have been unfamiliar since the moment we started to transition to the human world, and there's no way I could've prepared for that to change in a place where women use their bodies for financial gain.

"You need to get your shit together," Inferno bites out. "Makayla is a mission, not some piece of ass. You know the rules."

Do not become emotionally involved with a human, and physical relations between a

Warrior and a human are forbidden.

Yeah, I know the fucking rules.

"My shit is together," I lie.

"Ms. Steinbeck warned me about this," Demo comments, finally taking his eyes off the woman on the stage.

"About what?" Reaper asks, also joining the conversation.

"Transition sickness."

"Transition sickness?" I repeat. "What the fuck is that?"

Reaper slaps me on the shoulder. "It's when your brain's all foggy from the trip. Makes you act weird and shit."

"Shouldn't last more than a week or so, if the old woman is to be believed," Demo adds.

"I don't think this has anything to do with the transition," Inferno states with a smirk. "He's trippin' balls because Makayla's wicked hot, and he wants in her pants."

“She’s off limits, so it must be that sickness thing,” I bark.

It has to be that.

“She might be forbidden, but you *are* gonna have to talk to her.”

“No shit,” I say, glaring at Demo.

Acid turns away from the group to look toward the other end of the bar. “Well, looks like you get a reprieve tonight. Makayla’s busy with other customers.”

I follow his gaze and spot her laughing at something a man says. My muscles tense, and jealousy surges through me.

I need to get a grip.

“Since she’s otherwise occupied,” Inferno begins. “Why don’t we enjoy the other scenery?”

He’s ogling the chick on the stage, who’s shaking her ass and cupping her tits through the lace top she’s wearing. Her moves are provocative, and they do nothing for me.

My brothers make their way to an empty table close to the platform, and I follow behind at a slower pace. I make a point to watch the way other customers are behaving, how they’re interacting with one another.

It’s not hard to mimic them and blend in, but I’m not crazy about it. They objectify women, call out filthy remarks, and treat the females like they’re a piece of meat. Don’t get me wrong, I love the female body and have no problem fulfilling myself with it, but back in my day, we revered females, cherished them.

I certainly never would have dreamed of treating Mea the way these dancers are being treated.

“Odin is one cruel fucker,” Demo complains as he practically drools over Claire, the dancer who just stepped out on the stage. “Why would he send us here knowing we’d be around constant temptation?”

“I know it’s hard for you but keep it in your pants,” I order. “You can go without sex for a while. It won’t kill you.”

“Of course, it won’t. I’m already—”

“Do not finish that sentence.” My tone is harsh, demanding.

The bartender who lured Makayla away from us earlier steps up to the table. “Can I get you guys anything?” she asks, her eyes moving from me to the others.

Demo rakes his stare over her and groans. “He hates us.”

“Excuse me?” she asks.

“Nothing,” I answer. “And no, we’re good. Tha—”

“Speak for yourself,” Acid says with a grin. “I’ll take another beer, darlin’.”

“And you could get us your friend,” Inferno inserts. “What was her name? Makayla, I think.”

I wish I could say his audacity is surprising, but it’s anything but. Inferno has a chip on his shoulder most of the time and has no problem defying rules when necessary. While he hasn’t broken one yet, something tells me it’s only a matter of time.

“Makayla’s busy,” she says with a polite smile. It’s clear she’s leery of us, and the smile is forced. “But I’m Sarah, and I’m more than happy to help you with whatever you need.”

“Just a round of beers,” I tell her in an effort to get her to go away. “Thanks.”

“Sure thing.”

Sarah weaves her way through the tables and back to the bar to get our drinks. The music shifts, and the other men in the room begin to whistle and shout with excitement. I turn back toward the stage, and my mouth drops open when I see why everyone seems so happy.

Makayla is in the middle of the stage, and she’s no longer wearing jeans and a black tank top. No, instead she’s dressed in leather, her hair braided, and she looks just like a... Valkyrie.

Um...

My cock swells when she begins to move, and I shift in my chair. I haven't been celibate since my death, but I usually have to pull up a mental image of Mea to even come close to being turned on.

Apparently, Makayla is different.

And I'm not at all sure how I feel about that.

IO

MAKAYLA

“I will love you for eternity.”

My hands caress my husband’s cheeks as I press my lips to his. I can’t see him in the darkness of our hiding place, but I can feel him, all of him. His tongue sweeps into my mouth, and I moan with satisfaction. When our village is under attack isn’t the best time for the pleasures of the flesh, but I’ve always found it hard to resist him.

“You have to be quiet, my love,” he whispers. “I don’t want the Vikings to hear us.”

“Mmm.”

“Lift your dress up,” he demands as his hands smooth up my bare thighs.

I reach down and pull the material past my waist and over my head. After tossing it into the corner, I grab the hem of his shirt and yank it out of his waistband.

“So impatient,” he teases.

“I need you. Right now. Forever.”

He scoots me to the side and quickly undresses before easing me to my back in the dirt. Leaning over my body, aligning himself up with my entrance, he surges inside of me just as a flame flickers in the window, illuminating his face.

“My God, Vik—”

My eyes fly open, severing my connection to the dream world. My breaths come out in quick pants, and I slowly sit

up. The dream started out like it always does. The same husband and wife, the same life and death situation, but it morphed this time. Not into a nightmare, but something much worse.

It had been as if I was having an out-of-body experience, like I was watching myself with the man from Cherry's in the most intimate of moments.

What is wrong with me?

My pussy is still throbbing, as if it's silently begging to be worshiped. Ever since Viking left the bar last night, I haven't been able to keep him out of my mind. That's all this is... me obsessing over a hot guy because I'm horny.

That is all this is, right?

Then why did it feel so real? Why am I still experiencing physical sensations that should only happen by the touch of a man?

Because you can still feel his stare as you danced like a caress.

As soon as I stepped onto the stage earlier, I immediately sought him out. He'd been talking to Sarah, but quickly honed in on me, and never once did he look away. Hell, I'm not even sure he blinked.

Deciding a cold shower is in order, I climb out of bed and head to the bathroom. Unfortunately, the frigid water doesn't dull my senses one bit, so I turn the knob and let the hot stream wash over me.

And then I conjure up an image of Viking.

I cup my boobs and pinch my nipples. The little bite of pain sends a sliver of pleasure to my core, and I shudder. Tipping my head back and lifting a foot to rest of the side of the tub in order to have better access, I slide my hand down and tease my clit with one finger.

I work myself into a frenzy of need as I chase my orgasm. Every time I'm about to topple over the edge, my body betrays itself. No matter how hard I try, I can't get myself there.

Desperate for release, I shut the water off and return to my bedroom. I yank open the nightstand drawer and grab my black rose vibrator. This baby has never let me down.

I crawl onto the bed and lay on my back. Bending my knees and planting my feet on the mattress, I let my legs fall open wide. Then I close my eyes and take myself back to my dream.

With my toy, it doesn't take more than a few minutes to accomplish mind-numbing ecstasy. Finally satisfied, I set the rose aside and curl up under the blankets.

Maybe now I'll be able to get some sleep.



“YOU LOOK TIRED.”

Marsha leans back in her office chair and stares at me. I've barely slept in two days, so I'm exhausted. I would've stayed home, but I had this meeting, and I knew Marsha would be suspicious if I tried to reschedule.

“Late night,” I say evasively.

“Are you still working at Cherry's?”

“You know I am.”

Marsha's never judged me for the work I do to make money, but she's also never been a fan of the hours. I appreciate her concern, but it isn't necessary. It's not my job that's keeping me awake at night.

Viking has invaded my mind and my dreams. Over and over again he's made himself right at home in my brain, and in my fantasies. It's infuriating, and the most action I've seen in a while.

Marsha sighs. “Just make sure you're taking some time for yourself. I hate to see you like this.”

“You sound like my mom.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

I chuckle. “As you should.”

“Are you ready for your exam tomorrow?”

Not so much.

“Of course,” I tell her. “When have you ever known me to not be prepared for a test?”

“Never. But I’ve also never seen you as worn out as you are.”

I dismiss her concern with a flick of the wrist. “I’ll be fine.”

“If you say so.”

“Hey, have you heard any more about that position at the museum in Ireland?”

Marsha shakes her head. “Not a word. I know they’ll be taking several things into consideration when making their decision. Any applicant must supply their transcripts, their final thesis paper, as well as an essay on why they feel they’re the best candidate for the position. Pretty standard, really.”

I’m not planning on applying, but if Viking remains in town or in my head for any length of time, I might have to just to escape. He’s way out of my league, and despite not wanting to, I can’t shake Sarah’s warning.

He and his friends seemed nice enough, like I said, but that doesn’t mean they are.

“I hope your interest means you’re considering applying,” Marsha comments, pulling me from my thoughts. “It’d be a shame for them to miss out on someone like you. You’d bring so much value to the position.”

“Thanks. And honestly, I want to, but you know why I can’t.”

“I know. But let me ask you something.”

“What?”

“Do you think your dad would want you to put your life on hold for him?”

I can't stop the snort that escapes past my lips. “If it meant giving up childhood fantasies, as he puts it, he might just be okay with it.”

“Aw, I doubt that. He loves you and wants you to be happy. I know he does.”

Smiling, I nod. “I know. And I'm not putting my life on hold. I'm simply adjusting my original plans.”

“Uh-huh.”

I rise from the chair and sling my bag over my shoulder. “On that note, I better be going. I want to get some studying in at the library before I head back home.”

I don't have to work today, so hopefully I can put Viking out of my thoughts long enough to prep for my exam. Otherwise, I'll jeopardize my GPA, and now isn't the time to fuck up.

II

VIKING

“This better not take long.”

I glare at Mummy, the enforcer for the human world chapter of VRMC. The brothers

arrived at the clubhouse Ms. Steinbeck procured for us ten minutes ago, and they’ve done nothing but complain.

“Shut it,” Trooper, their president, barks. “We’re here on orders from Odin. It’ll take as long as it takes.” He shifts his attention to me and smirks. “Sorry about that. It’s been a long ride to get here, and the guys are tired and horny.”

“Speaking of... Where are the bitches?” Doom, the road captain, asks. “We were promised pussy and booze.”

“I don’t know who promised that,” I begin. “But all we can supply is the alcohol. No pussy here.”

“How the fuck does that even work?” Demo asks as he crosses the room. “Warriors can’t sleep with humans, so isn’t pussy out of the question?”

Trooper and Rave, his VP, exchange a look. I can’t decipher it but fortunately for me, I don’t have to because Stoner, their SAA speaks up.

“They don’t know, Troop,” he comments.

“Know what?” Inferno demands.

Trooper scratches the side of his nose. “Uh, I think that info should come from Odin.”

Narrowing my eyes at him, I advance until I'm within inches of his face. "What.

Information?"

Inferno steps closer and holds his hand out until flames dance from his palm. "I suggest you answer his question," he growls.

Judging by the fear in Trooper's eyes, there was some information Odin didn't share with *him* too. He raises his hands in surrender and takes a step back.

"We'll tell you our secrets if you tell us yours," Rave says casually, nodding toward the fire.

I arch a brow at Trooper. "That work for you?"

"Call him off, and you've got a deal."

I incline my head at Inferno, who fists his hand, snuffing out the pyrotechnics. Returning my attention to Trooper, I say, "Now spill."

He takes a deep breath. "None of the brothers in my chapter are dead."

"Say what?" Acid bites out, edging his way closer to the rest of us. He's been sitting on one of the couches in the main room, no doubt taking everything in, but otherwise silent.

"How is that possible?" I demand. "Valhalla Rising MC is for Warriors. You can't be a Warrior if you're still a living human."

"Under normal circumstances, yes," Trooper agrees. "But Odin has been hand-selecting humans for hundreds of years to represent Valhalla here on Earth. The majority of us then move on to Valhalla when our time comes and end up being prospects for you." He slides his Demo. "In fact, you used to be one of us."

"No fucking way," Demo says incredulously.

"Way," Rave confirms. "Odin makes sure that your assigned Valkyrie wipes any memories of your time with the MC here."

“Why the fire pits would he do that?” Reaper demands.

“Fire pits?” Doom asks, his brows knit in confusion.

“That’s Hell in the heavens,” Acid explains. “Apparently, Odin didn’t think one demonic wasteland in the universe was enough.”

“Your turn,” Trooper says, not wasting any time getting to our end of the deal.

I look at my men one by one, silently asking if they’re okay with showing off their... gifts. Each man nods, but none appear thrilled.

“Let’s take this outside,” I instruct and lead the way.

Fortunately, Ms. Steinbeck thought to get us a building that sat on quite a bit of land with no neighbors, so there’s no chance we’ll be seen.

Once we’re all out in the fresh air, Trooper, Rave, Doom, Mummy, and Stoner line up for the show.

“You’ve already seen what Inferno can do,” I announce. “But we all have some sort of *talent*.”

“You all don’t create fire in your hands?” Mummy asks with a smirk.

“No. Each of us has unique abilities.”

Stoner pulls a joint out of his pocket and sticks it between his lips as he walks forward, stopping in front of Inferno. When he looks at my VP expectantly, I expect Inferno to knock Stoner’s teeth down his throat. But he surprises me.

“This isn’t a damn party trick,” Inferno grumbles as he creates flame in his palm and lights the joint. “I won’t do that for you twice.”

“Noted,” Stoner says after taking a puff and returning to stand with his brothers.

Wanting to get this over with, I walk to the hose that’s attached to the side of the building and turn it on. I haven’t done this in a very long time, and I can only hope I’m still able.

When I lift the hose and arc the stream of water in the direction of the US chapter brothers, they sputter when the cold liquid hits them. Quickly, I focus all my energy on the stream, using all my mental strength to get it to do my silent bidding.

And nothing.

“Jesus, turn that off!” Doom shouts, holding his hands in front of his face.

My anger spikes, and that does the trick. Sudden strong emotions are rarely a good thing when it comes to our powers, but in this case, they’re serving a purpose, and I’m grateful for them. While the nozzle remains in the same position, the water shifts and hits my chapter brothers in the face.

“Motherfucker!” Reaper grits as I guide the water to the ground and then turn the hose off. “You could’ve made that go anywhere else, you know that, right?”

I grin, knowing he’s one hundred percent right. “What fun would that have been?”

For the first time since completing the transition, normalcy starts to creep back in. I love my brothers, would die for them if I were still alive, and most certainly would kill for them. But I also thoroughly enjoy fucking with them.

“Impressive,” Mummy states dryly as he wipes his face dry. “So, fire and water. Does that mean you’ve got all the elements covered.”

“In a manner of speaking, yes,” I admit and shift my attention to Acid. “You’re up next.”

Acid smirks, and I can tell by the look in his eyes that however he’s going to demonstrate his gift is going to piss someone right the fuck off.

He stalks away and around to the front of the building where our bikes are parked. The rumble of a motor firing reaches my ears, and I groan.

This is gonna be worse than I thought.

When Acid appears straddling a Harley I don't recognize, my entire body stiffens. We might not have to worry about it in Valhalla all that much, but any biker worth a damn knows you don't touch another man's motorcycle. And you definitely don't ride it without permission.

Rave roars with rage, making it instantly clear that the bike belongs to him. "What the fuck?"

Acid brings the bike to a stop right in front of Rave. "Watch this," he taunts as he closes his eyes to concentrate.

Beneath him, the Harley begins to melt until it's nothing but a puddle of scorching metal between his legs and a leather seat practically floating in it.

Rave's face turns a bright red, and his mouth drops open in disbelief. But before his wits return, Acid moves away so his body isn't near the destruction, and the biker slowly but surely starts to reform on its own until it's returned to pristine condition.

"Holy..." Rave darts his gaze from his Harley to Acid and back again. "How... But... You just... That's not possible."

As if what he did is par for the course, Acid shrugs. "Deny it all you want, but what you saw is real. My body temp rises to such a degree that I can melt or manipulate metal but as soon as I step away from it, the heat disappears and the metal reforms to its original form."

"I can't wait to die," Stoner mumbles. "I wonder what power I'll have."

"With as much weed as you inhale, I'm guessing it will be something with smoke," Trooper comments dryly.

We all laugh, and the tension eases a bit.

"I've gotta see what those two do," Doom says, pointing at Reaper and Demo. "It's gotta be pretty fucking amazing."

"It's..." Reaper scowls. "It's something, but I'm not sure amazing is the right word."

Reaper has never been a fan of his gift, but he's also the only one of us who possessed it while still human. At least,

part of it anyway.

“C’mon, then,” Mummy says. “Show us what you’ve got.”

Reaper glances at Demo. “You first, brother. Pretty sure mine should be saved for last.”

Demo nods and then does what he does best. He takes off toward the building at a run and sails through the brick wall effortlessly.

“Way cool,” Stoner says with appreciation.

“We need that building, or he’d show you the rest,” I say.

“The rest?”

“Demo is short for Demolition,” Inferno explains. “If he stops in the middle of the solid surface, it’ll crumble to the ground.”

“Damn.”

“How do you not do this shit all day every day?” Trooper asks. “I’d never get shit done because I’d be playing all the time.”

“All of this might look cool, but it’s not,” Reaper snaps. “It’s a goddamn curse.”

Demo returns to this side of the wall and stalks toward us before anyone can explore Reaper’s fury. He must sense the shift in tone because his body goes rigid.

“What’s wrong?”

“Let’s just get this over with,” Reaper grumbles, ignoring the question. “I need a volunteer.”

Stoner eagerly raises his hand, and I can’t help but chuckle at his exuberance. His excitement makes me wish that drugs had an effect on us because I’d give anything to be as mellow as he seems to be.

Reaper grabs Stoner’s forearm and drags him about ten feet away from the rest of us. He needs space to do his thing, especially if he wants to be able to complete it without interruption.

When they stop, Reaper positions Stoner in front of him so they're face to face.

"You ready?" he asks the man.

"Uh... I think so." Stoner's statement sounds more like a statement, and he's suddenly hesitant.

"This is gonna hurt," Reaper says a second before resting his hand on Stoner's bicep.

Stoner immediately crumbles to the ground. He's dead, and his skin quickly starts to turn ashen.

"What the fuck?!" Trooper demands as he lunges for his brother.

Inferno and Demo wrap their arms around him in an effort to keep him away so Reaper can finish. Amidst the shouts and demands for an explanation, my enforcer maintains his concentration on Stoner.

Reaper squats and rests both hands on his chest, and within seconds, Stoner's flying into a sitting position, inhaling air into his lungs as fast as he can.

Once he's sure the man is okay, Reaper stands and flares down at him. "What we can do isn't fun and games. People get hurt."

With that, he walks away, disappearing around the building. Taking a life and reviving it always drains his energy and puts him in a foul mood. Acid follows him to ensure he's okay. The two of them have always been close, and for whatever reason, Acid is the one man Reaper has never tried to take out.

Those of us remaining are quiet for a few minutes. No doubt, the human chapter is processing what they just witnessed and struggling to come up with a rhyme or reason for it all. I get it. I possess a gift but am still always stunned when new Warriors develop their own abilities. It's a lot to wrap your mind around, and nothing will ever change that.

"Now that that's over, maybe we should head inside and get down to business," I suggest when I can't take the silence

any longer.

Trooper nods, and we traipse toward the front door of the clubhouse. When we enter, I spot Reaper and Acid at the bar. Reaper is knocking back shots while Acid continues to supply them.

We migrate to the meeting room and fill the seats around the table. Acid and Reaper are the last to enter, and it's not surprising when I see Reaper carrying a bottle of booze. He'll drink for a while, endlessly chasing a buzz that will never come.

"Trooper," I begin. "We need your chapter to fill us in on the work that you do. We're going to be here for a while, and we have to appear like we belong. Back in Valhalla, our tasks are more similar to law enforcement-type things, and something tells me that down here, the opposite is true."

He huffs out a laugh. "Doesn't get much more opposite. How do you feel about getting your hands dirty?"

"We'll do whatever the fuck we have to so we can go home," Reaper barks.

Two hours later, we've got plans to assist with a weapons purchase, three drug supply runs, a party, and a way to get more time with Makayla.

She is the reason we're here, after all.

MAKAYLA

“T hanks.”

I smile at the bumbling freshman who had no clue how to find the books he needed for his first research project.

“You’re welcome. And don’t ever hesitate to ask for help when you need it,” I advise. “It’ll make your life so much easier.”

He nods and walks away from the counter, leaving me free to go back to my own research.

It’s been a week since the night I met Viking, and I’m finally back to my normal studious self. It took longer than I’d have liked to push him out of my mind and refocus on my work, but I did it.

After several more dreams and cold showers.

It’s late on Friday afternoon, and the library is about as empty as it gets. The majority of the student body is gearing up for the weekend and frat parties. The last thing on their minds is books, which means I can think of little else.

Deep into the giant tome of Norse mythology, I don’t notice the door open. I’m scribbling notes when a throat is cleared, pulling my attention upward.

Oh. My. God.

“You’re not an easy woman to find,” Viking says smoothly, leaning on the counter.

“How... Why...” I swallow and try not to squirm in my seat. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, I wanted to talk to you more the other night, but that didn’t happen. So, I went back to Cherry’s and asked around about where I could find you.”

Sweet or stalker?

“But... Why?”

Viking straightens with a grin. His height is impressive, and he looks every bit as dangerous in his jeans and leather vest as he did the first time I saw him.

Dangerous and delicious.

“I think I just explained that,” he says.

“Right. Um, okay.” Needing something to do with my hands so I don’t dive over the counter and grope him where he stands, I pull my hair into a messy bun and wrap the hair tie I wear on my wrist around it. “Hi.”

“Hi.” He glances down at the book and tilts his head in its direction. “Whatcha reading?”

“Oh, uh, you’d probably find it boring.”

“Try me.”

I shove a piece of paper in the book to mark my spot before closing it to show him the front cover. “It’s just some research I’m doing for my thesis.”

Viking scans the words and arches a brow. “Valhalla?”

Some tidbit of information niggles at the back of my mind, but I can’t quite figure out what it is.

“Yeah. I’m a little, um, obsessed.” I shrug.

“There are worse things to be obsessed with.”

I tilt my head. “True.”

“What specifically about Valhalla interests you?” he asks.

“Everything.” I half-heartedly chuckle at myself. “I grew up hearing stories about it, and I’ve never been able to put

them out of my mind.”

“Well, I can relate.”

Viking turns around so I’m able to see the back of his vest, and that tidbit slams into my brain full force.

That’s right. He’s part of Valhalla Rising MC.

When he faces me again, my heart skips a beat. How one man can be so damn sexy is beyond me.

“Well, I won’t keep you,” he says. “I just wanted to stop by and see if you’d be interested in hanging out sometime.”

“Why? You don’t even know me.”

“You’re right, I don’t. But there was something about you that drew me in.” His smile falters, betraying his nerves. “If you’re not interested, tha—”

“I’m interested,” I blurt, and my cheeks heat with embarrassment. “I mean, yeah, I’d like to hang out.”

“Great. The club is throwing a party tomorrow night. You should come.”

“Did I hear you say party?”

I whirl around and see Jeff standing at the opposite end of the counter. He closes the distance between us and leans his elbows on the surface, much like Viking did.

Viking looked better doing it, though.

“Eavesdropping?” I ask sarcastically.

“Of course not,” Jeff quips with a smirk. “I came to do some research and simply overheard part of your conversation.”

I glance from him to Viking and hesitate when I see that the biker’s smile has turned into a frown.

“Do I know you?” he asks Jeff.

“Don’t think so, man. Pretty sure I’d remember you if we’d met before.”

Viking stares at him for a few moments before seemingly mentally shrugging off whatever is bothering him. His lips don't tip into a full-blown smile again, but he no longer appears to want to crawl out of his skin.

"So, a party?" Jeff prods.

"My club is throwing a party tomorrow night," Viking explains. "If you're free, you should come."

"Oh, I'm free." Jeff turns to me and grins wildly. "We could carpool if you want."

No! Absolutely not.

I stifle a groan. "I've got a lot to do tomorrow, so I'll pass on the carpooling. I might have to go straight there after running errands."

Viking eyes me suspiciously as if he can tell I'm lying. Thankfully, he doesn't acknowledge it as he reaches over the counter for a piece of paper and pen. He scribbles something quickly and hands it to Jeff.

"That's the address. Party starts at eight," he says.

"Thanks, man." He turns to me. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah. Can't wait," I mumble.

Jeff walks away, and I try to think of a way to get out of this party without hurting Viking's feelings. I want to go, desperately, but I have no desire to spend more time around Jeff than I have to.

"Why do I get the feeling you're upset?" Viking comments.

"Upset?"

"That I invited him."

"Not upset." *Liar, liar, pants on fire.* "Surprised, actually. When you first saw him, you looked like you wanted to run as far and as fast as you could."

“I just didn’t get good vibes from him.” Viking’s jaw tics, and his good mood fades.

“Then why invite him?”

Men can be so stupid sometimes. Stupid and confusing.

“What’s that saying? Keep your friends close and your enemies closer?” He shakes his head and changes the subject. “So, will you still come?”

As much as it irks me that Jeff will be there, I can’t ignore the pull to spend more time with Viking. Besides, maybe he’s just as passionate about Valhalla as I am. If nothing else, there should at least be some good conversation.

Yeah, because conversation is what you want from him.

So, will you still come?

His question dances in my brain, teasing, tempting.

Oh yeah. I’d love to come.

“Sure. Why not?”

ODIN

“Do you think he knows?”

I glance at Kára and take in her worried expression. “No, he doesn’t know,” I

assure her.

It’s hard to tell if her concern is based on her position as a Valkyrie or because she cares deeply for Viking. While I can often decipher what my subjects are thinking, I try not to abuse that power with the Valkyries because it tends to backfire with their own mind-reading abilities.

“Maybe I should go check in on him,” Kára comments, her eyes focused on the monitor that shows what’s going on in the clubhouse Ms. Steinbeck had set up for the guys.

“Would that make you feel better?” I ask.

Startled by my question, she whips her gaze to mine. “Sir?”

“Kára, I don’t like to see you so worried. If going to the human world would make you feel better, I’ll allow it.”

I know what people think: that I’m only invested in my own interests. But that’s simply not the case. I have rules and am hard on the Valkyries and Warriors because I need to keep my heaven in order. I do what I do for survival. Not only of myself, but of them.

“I think it would be best if I went,” she says, nibbling on her bottom lip nervously.

Kára is typically calm and controlled. She's my strongest Valkyrie, despite others believing it's Herja. I hate seeing her so unsettled.

“Then go. Check in on him. But be careful, Kára,” I tell her. “Don't disclose any information I haven't yet approved.”

VIKING

“You really can’t get drunk?”

I shake my head as I carry the last keg inside. Trooper has had question after question since we got past our pissing match outside the other day. I don’t mind answering them, especially if he can get them out of his system before Makayla shows up tonight.

“We normally don’t sleep either, but the Valkyries worked some mojo on us during the transition and sleep comes too easily here. Unfortunately, that mojo doesn’t extend to everything.”

Trooper sets the case of whiskey bottles on the floor behind the bar, and I place the keg next to it.

“I’m surprised they didn’t strip you of your abilities,” he comments.

“Honestly, me too,” I admit. “If one of us accidentally uses them where a human can see, we’d be in a world of trouble.” I smirk at him. “Well, a human other than you and the other brothers.”

“Yo, Viking!”

I turn toward the stairs and see Inferno and Rave striding in our direction.

“What’s up?”

“We reached out to all of their chapter’s contacts,” Inferno says with a grin. “This is gonna be one helluva party if everyone shows up.”

“Which is exactly what we need,” I say. “Makayla has to see that we’re established in the area. If it was only us here, she’d be suspicious for sure.”

“I don’t know, Pres,” Demo says as he steps out of the kitchen. “The way she was drooling over you at Cherry’s... Pretty sure she wants your cock and won’t even notice other people.”

The thought of Makayla anywhere near my cock makes it harden to an almost painful degree. My brain screams ‘you can’t have her’, but my body clearly isn’t listening.

“Can we talk about something else?” I demand, adjusting myself.

Demo chuckles. “I’m a little worried about you, Pres. By the time we get to go home, you’re gonna have a serious case of blue balls.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“Leave him alone,” Inferno orders. “Viking has to be on his game tonight, and you taunting him isn’t helping.”

Demo holds his hands up and backs away while shaking his head.

Smart man. I was about to find some water to drown him in.

“Speaking of tonight,” Trooper begins. “Is there anything we can do to help with your mission?”

“Nah. Just being here is enough. It gives us credibility.”

“You gonna be pissed if we actually party?” Rave asks. “I mean, I’m not exactly planning on keeping it in my pants tonight.”

“Do whatever you normally do,” I say. “We’re the ones who have to blend.”

“Thank fuck,” he murmurs. “A party without pussy is no damn party.”

We spend the next hour getting everything ready, and when I’m satisfied that there are no other tasks to complete, I head to

my room to shower and change.

After adjusting the temperature of the water, I step under the spray and let the heat of it seep into my muscles. I'm usually very good at controlling my nerves, but knowing that Makayla will be here in less than an hour has me on edge.

Demo's words taunt me from the recesses of my mind. Is Makayla really that interested in me? Or is my horny-as-hell brother only imagining her intrigue?

Remembering how quickly she said she was interested in hanging out, I grin.

Yeah, she wants me.

And that creates a major problem because I want her just as badly.

As I finish in the shower, I recite the Warrior Code of Conduct. My body might not remember what it is, but I sure do.

After grabbing the towel I set on the bathroom vanity, I stride into the bedroom.

"Hello, Viking."

Startled, I drop the towel and reach for my ax on the dresser.

"Not exactly the greeting I was expecting," Kára comments dryly.

Abandoning the weapon, I bend down and snatch the towel off the floor before securing it around my waist.

"What the fire pits are you doing here?"

"I came to ask you the same thing."

"Excuse me?"

Kára sighs and moves to sit on the bed. "Viking, how long have we known each other?"

"Too fucking long if you think it's okay to pop in unannounced when I'm naked."

She waves her hand dismissively. “It’s nothing I haven’t seen before.” Leaning back, she rests her palms on the mattress. “Anyway, we’ve known one another for a long time.”

“Yes.”

“Then why aren’t you happy to see me? I thought for sure you’d be itching to get home by now.”

A growl erupts from the back of my throat. “Just tell me why you’re here.”

“Odin sent me.”

“He what?”

“Well, that’s not exactly true,” she admits. “We’ve been keeping tabs on you and the others, and I may have alluded to the fact that I should check in with you and make sure you’re okay.”

“He agreed?” Before she can answer, I continue. “And why wouldn’t I be okay?”

“He did,” she confirms. “As for your other question, you’re forgetting how in tune with one another we are.”

She’s right. I had forgotten. From the moment Kára was assigned as my Valkyrie, she’s been able to read my thoughts and anticipate my every move, my every need. Which begs the question... What did she sense or see that concerned her?

It’s not all that difficult to figure out.

“No, Viking, it’s not that difficult.” She rises to her feet and slowly walks toward the door. “Why don’t you get dressed, and then we can finish this discussion, hmm?”

Without waiting for my agreement, she disappears into the hall, closing the door behind her. I dig through the clothes I bought upon arriving in town and settle on a pair of jeans, a yellow Henley, and my cut.

Once I have my boots on and laced up, I open the door and wave Kára inside.

“Whatever you have to say, just say it,” I bark. “I’ve got shit to do.”

“Yes, I’m aware of what you have to do,” she sasses. “Do you really think this party is a good idea?”

“It’s a way to get close to Makayla.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “And just how *close* are you planning on getting?”

“As close as I have to,” I snap, frustrated that she’s asking questions she already knows the answers to.

“Viking, do you remember what I told you on your death day?”

My heart rate kicks up, which is odd because I’m still getting used to a beating heart.

“You told me a lot of things,” I hedge.

“You’re being deliberately obtuse,” she accuses. “What did I tell you about Mea?”

Just as quickly as my heart rate increased, it slows, and I swear I can hear blood whooshing through my veins.

“Why are you bringing her into this?”

“What was on your mind when you saw Makayla for the first time?”

Whirling around, I grab my ax before spinning back to face Kára. I advance on her and press the blade to her throat.

“Get to the fucking point,” I snarl. “I don’t have time for cryptic games.”

She narrows her eyes and carefully rests her hand over mine to push it down and lower my weapon.

“Just because we’re not in Valhalla, don’t think I won’t put you on your ass,” she bites out.

I thrust my free hand through my still-damp hair and heave a sigh. “Why are you asking about Mea and Makayla?” I ask, suddenly mentally drained.

Kára cups my face and smiles sadly. “Viking, think about the questions I’ve asked. The answers you seek will come to you. Just... be careful. I have a great deal of power, but even I can’t heal a broken Warrior. Not in the way you’ll need me to if you don’t tread lightly.”

With her warning hanging in the air, Kára shimmers as she vanishes back to the heavens.

I replay every single word she spoke since arriving in my mind, trying to sort out her unspoken message.

Do you remember what I told you on your death day?

What was on your mind when you saw Makayla for the first time?

Why is she asking me those things? What does one have to do with—

No.

It can’t be.

Can it?

MAKAYLA

“I can’t believe you’re going to their clubhouse.”

I glance at the GPS on my dash while I listen to Sarah chastise me for not listening to her about not staying away from Viking and his club. As soon as I got in my car after work last night, I input the address he gave me just in case I lost the piece of paper he wrote it on.

“It’s a party, not an orgy.” I chuckle. “Calm down, Mama Bear.”

“You joke, but I’m serious,” she chides. “My father is a lawyer, and he’s represented bikers in the past. When I think about the crimes they were accused of, it scares me that you’re hanging out with them. What happens if you actually start to fall for this guy? Huh? What then?”

“Again, it’s just a party. Not a date, not an orgy, not a murder spree or drug deal... a party. If you are so against it, why’d you agree to cover my shift at Cherry’s?”

When I agreed to go to the party, I totally spaced that I had to work. That’s what that man does to my brain.

Maybe Sarah is right to be worried.

“Because I worry, but I’m not a monster. I know not all bikers are trouble, but he seemed to have trouble written all over him. That being said, if anyone deserves to have fun, it’s you, and I want you to have fun, Makayla. I just want you to be safe, that’s all.”

“And I appreciate it. I really do. But I’m a big girl. I’ll be fine. And if there’s any sign of trouble, I’ll get the hell out of Dodge, okay?”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

She heaves a sigh. “Fine. But when he hurts you, don’t get mad when I tell you I told you so.”

“Girl, you’d supply the wine and ice cream.”

“Dammit, I would.” She laughs lightly. “I’d commiserate with you and console you, but I’m going to do it while I tell you I told you so.”

“And if he doesn’t hurt me?”

“Then I’ll come to the wedding.”

“Okay, that’s taking it a little too far.”

The GPS commands me to take the next left, and I do. Headlights bounce in my rearview mirror as the car behind me takes the same turn.

“Look, I hear Steve coming down the hall,” Sarah says in a whisper. “I gotta go. Be careful.”

“I will.”

She disconnects the call, and I turn up the radio. The further I drive, the more rural the route gets. There’s very little traffic, but there’s still that car behind me.

When it follows me turn to turn, my stomach churns. And when the headlights flash several times as if urging me to pull over, I stomp my foot on the gas and speed up.

“What the hell?” I mutter when the vehicle catches up with me.

I’m so far outside of town that there’s nowhere safe for me to stop and no real way to lose the person. My brain flashes back to the note that was left on my windshield.

You’ll regret this.

Panic digs its talons into me. I didn't think much of it at the time, but now it's all I can think about. Who wrote the note? Is that who's behind me?

The only thing I can do is keep driving until I reach the clubhouse. Then, hopefully, someone is outside so I don't have to get out of the car alone if this asshole is still around.

"You'll arrive at your destination in two miles."

I breathe a sigh of relief at the GPS's instructions. Not too much longer.

When I reach the address, I turn onto the long dirt lane. A large brick building and rows of motorcycles come into view, but I don't see anyone outside. As I come to a stop, I throw my car into park and push open the door.

The vehicle that was following me pulls up next to me. The driver slams on the brakes as they simultaneously roll down the passenger window, and I see red.

"Damn, Mak. What's the rush?"

"What the fuck, Jeff?!" I shout as I shove out of my vehicle.

"What?" he asks innocently.

The window slides up, and Jeff cuts the engine. I stomp around his car, beyond pissed off. After he shuts the driver's door, he turns and faces me.

"You scared the absolute shit out of me," I accuse.

My voice is still raised, and the rational part of me pleads with the emotional parts to calm down to no avail. Blood pumps through my veins, and my heart beats erratically.

As for Jeff, he simply shrugs. "Wasn't trying to scare you."

Are you fucking kidding me?!

"Bullshit!" I yell.

Jeff's smirk falters, and anger passes over his eyes. He snakes his hand and tightly wraps his fingers around my arm. "Would you stop ye—"

“You’ve got exactly one second to get your hands off her.”

Jeff immediately releases me, raises his hands, and whirls around toward the familiar voice. I rise onto my tiptoes and see Viking weaving through parked motorcycles, murder in his eyes.

“I w-wasn’t going t-to hurt her,” Jeff stammers.

“You never lay your hands on a woman uninvited,” Viking snarls. When he reaches us, he steps around Jeff and grabs my biceps lightly. “Are you okay?”

“Y-yeah.” I nod. “I’m fine.”

Viking stares into my eyes, capturing my gaze and refusing to let it go. His touch is gentle, but it’s burning a path from my flesh to the juncture between my legs.

“Are you sure?” he prods. “Because I heard you shouting over the music inside.”

“I’m sure. He just scared me, is all.”

“Explain,” he demands.

“It’s nothing. I just...” I shake my head to gather my thoughts. “I thought someone was following me on the way here, but it was only Jeff. I let my fear rule my head and lashed out at him.”

Viking glances over his shoulder. “Why were you following her?”

“Look, man. It was just a coincidence,” Jeff insists, and I feel foolish for automatically assuming the worst. “When I noticed it was Makayla in front of me, I flashed my lights. I figured she knew what my car looks like so I didn’t think anything of it.”

“Why did you grab her?”

“She was causing a scene, and it was embarrassing. All I was doing was trying to get her to quiet down.”

“Next time, try asking,” Viking says matter-of-factly.

It's not lost on me that he's doing the very thing he's angry about: touching me uninvited. The difference though, is his touch is electric and extremely welcome whereas Jeff's was... *Ick.*

The big man shifts his attention back to me, and he lowers his arms to take a step back. It takes all my willpower not to whimper at the absence of him so close.

"Let's go inside, Makayla. I'll get you a drink, and you can forget this shithead even exists."

"I'm right—"

Viking spins around so fast, Jeff has no time to react. He wraps his hand around Jeff's throat and lifts him off so the toes of his shoes barely touch the ground.

"I already regret inviting you," Viking growls. "Don't make me regret letting you walk away unharmed." He shoves him to the ground. "Get the fuck off my property."

Jeff scrambles to his feet and brushes past me to get back in his car. Within seconds, he's backing down the lane.

Viking's jaw tics as he watches the man leave, and I find myself wanting to reassure him. I rest my hand on his forearm, and he glances down at where we're joined.

"I really am okay," I tell him.

He lifts his golden brown eyes to mine. "I'm sorry I reacted like that. But no one touches my woman and gets away with it."

His woman?

VIKING

Well, shit.

I didn't mean for those words to fall from my tongue, but then again, Makayla isn't running away screaming so maybe it's not so bad.

When I heard the shouting from inside, image after image of Mea assaulted me, and Kára's questions lit up alongside them like giant flashing neon signs.

Do you remember what I told you on your death day?

What was on your mind when you saw Makayla for the first time?

Without thinking, I raced outside, and the moment I saw Jeff with his hands on Makayla, my brain transposed Mea's face over hers. It was as if I was back in my home village, waiting for the Vikings to attack.

I knew it was Makayla I was protecting, but deep in my soul, it felt like she was my wife.

"You're spiraling."

Makayla's soft voice pulls me out of my thoughts, and I focus on her. "What?"

"I can see it on your face," she says with a thoughtful smile. "You're regretting what you just said, and you're spiraling."

"I..." Swallowing past the lump in my throat, I let my shoulders relax. "I didn't me—"

“It’s okay.” Makayla reaches for my hand and links her fingers with mine. “You didn’t scare me off.”

But I’m scaring the fuck outta myself.

“You mean you’re not gonna run for the hills?” I say, forcing a teasing tone.

“I’m not too big on running,” she says with a chuckle. “And I don’t scare very easily.” Makayla tips her head toward the main road. “Well, unless I think someone is following me and means me harm, apparently.”

“I’d never let anyone hurt you, Me—” I press my lips together, realizing what I

almost said. “Makayla.”

Her forehead wrinkles in confusion, but she must accept the slight blunder as just that because she doesn’t comment on it.

“So, are we going to stand out here all night, or are you going to take me inside?”

My tension melting away, I grin. “Let’s go.”

I urge her to the door, and she hesitates when we step over the threshold. She doesn’t appear scared, but I stop to give her a minute.

“We can go back out if you’d be more comfortable,” I tell her.

She shakes her head vehemently. “No, absolutely not.” Makayla looks up at me. “I’m just taking it all in. I don’t know what I expected, but this wasn’t it.”

I glance around the room to try and see everything from her perspective. Every stool at the bar is taken, there are several games of pool going on, the music is loud, and there are people I don’t know filling up almost every inch of the space.

“Is that good or bad?”

She squeezes my hand. “It’s fine, Viking.”

Turning so I'm facing her, I maintain our connection and rock back on my heels. "So, what do you want to do first?"

"Give me a tour?"

"You got it." I twist to face the crowd again. "This is the common area."

Makayla laughs, and even though the music is blaring, the sound of her

happiness is like Cupid's arrow to the heart. I'm a hard man, a dead man, but I could listen to her laugh all day and feel the most alive I've ever felt.

"I figured," she says. "It reminds me a lot of a bar you'd find downtown."

I've never been to a bar downtown, or anywhere else for that matter, but I've seen them on Odin's monitors, and she's absolutely right.

I point to the door behind the bar area. "In there is the kitchen and also where we eat most of our meals. And down that hall," I say, indicating the hallway across the room. "Is the bathroom and several bedrooms for anyone who visits or needs a place to crash if they've had too much to drink."

"And where do you sleep?" she asks, but her eyes widen comically as her hand flies to her mouth.

I chuckle at her obvious discomfort. "There are more rooms upstairs. Quarters, really. We each have a room with an attached bath and small sitting area. When you've got that many guys living in such close proximity, it's always a good idea to have space where each can go to be alone."

"I get it. I lived in the dorms on campus during my freshman year of college, and I always felt a bit claustrophobic. It's much better having my own house now."

Conversation trails off, but it's not awkward. Being with Makayla is... peaceful. Even if there's a bit of chaos surrounding us.

"Hey, Viking!"

I whip my head around and spot Trooper stalking toward us carrying two beers.

“Who’s that?” Makayla asks.

“Trooper. He’s the president of another Valhalla Rising MC chapter.” When he reaches us, his gaze rakes over Makayla. “So, is this your old lady?”

Yes. I think so.

I can’t say that though because I barely know her, and what if I’m wrong? Besides, fucker knows exactly who she is.

“This is Makayla,” I supply, annoyance filtering into my tone.

“Well, Makayla, glad you could make it,” Trooper says. “Viking here has talked about you all day.”

Makayla’s eyes dart to me, seemingly stunned.

He’s going to wish he were dead when I get my hands on him.

“You’re so full of shit,” I snap.

Trooper grins. “Whatever, brother. Here, I brought you some drinks.” He thrusts the beers at me, giving me no option but to take them from him. “Have fun you two. And don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

With those parting words, he walks away only to sidle up to a practically naked woman and grind his denim-clad dick against her ass.

“He’s... charming,” Makayla comments.

“He’s an asshole.”

For the next two hours, I take Makayla around and introduce her to the people I do know. As the evening wears on, she seems to relax and get more and more comfortable. I’d chalk it up to the alcohol, but she nurses the same beer all night.

“Do you want something else to drink?” I finally ask her when she guides me out of the throng of people to stand by the

wall.

“No, I’m good.”

“Are you sure? You’ve barely touched the beer.”

“I know, but only because I’m driving.”

Ah, yes. It’s illegal to consume alcohol and drive here. I forgot about that because we don’t feel the effects of the booze and no such rule exists in Valhalla.

“Right. Smart thinking.”

Makayla nods but her attention is captured by something across the room. I follow her gaze and see that she’s looking at the VRMC logo that’s painted on the wall.

“That’s Odin’s shield,” I explain. “And the two axes represent the two types of people that serve him in Valhalla: Warriors and Valkyries.”

“Why is your club called Valhalla Rising?” she asks, genuine curiosity in her tone.

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her that I’m a Warrior from Valhalla, that we really do exist, but I don’t. It’s against the damn Code.

“The club’s founder believed he was a descendent of a Warrior,” I tell her, recalling the backstory that Ms. Steinbeck provided in our folders. “I don’t know if Valhalla is real or myth, but I like the idea that there’s a place in heaven for people like us.”

“People like you?”

“Warriors.”

“Yeah, but, you’re not warriors,” she says. “Not in the way the mythology describes.”

I wasn’t exactly sure how someone could get facts wrong about Valhalla when Odin first assigned me this mission, but I’m getting it now.

“How does mythology describe it?” I ask cautiously.

Makayla's face lights up, clearly happy with the subject. "In order to gain entry into Valhalla, a man must die bravely in battle. And typically, they live their lives to serve Odin and believe in the heaven he created whole-heartedly."

Well, that's not accurate, otherwise, I wouldn't be a Warrior.

"Is that what the books say?"

"That's what everything says," she quips.

"Then *everything* is wrong."

Her good mood diminishes, and her eyes darken. "I don't think so."

Remember the mission. Don't forget why you were sent here in the first place.

It's hard to stick to the plans as they were laid out for me, especially after Kára's earlier visit, but if I'm wrong and Makayla is simply an assignment, it's in my best interest to do exactly that.

Even if it shatters my soul in the process.

"You're correct that Warriors die bravely in battle," I acquiesce. "*Some* Warriors. The majority of them, though, are regular men who die selflessly protecting others from harm. They aren't warriors in the conventional sense, in the way you've been taught, but they have the heart of a warrior."

"And where are you getting your information?" she counters hotly.

"It's pretty common knowledge."

The expression on her face has me wanting to call the words back as soon as they leave my mouth. I've offended her, and that's not at all what I wanted to do.

But that fucking mission...

"Common knowledge?" she repeats. "I've spent my life studying everything there is to learn about Odin and Valhalla, along with other Norse mythology, and nowhere is there anything to support your statement. Besides, with your theory,

any man, good or bad, could get into Valhalla based on one act of kindness, essentially. They could be evil their entire lives, but do a good deed that lasts five minutes, and poof, Valhalla bound?" She shakes her head. "I don't think so."

"Denying it doesn't make it less true."

"And wishing it were true to justify the way you live doesn't make it so."

My hackles rise. I don't want to fight with her, but she's making it difficult to remain calm.

"The way I live?"

We stare at one another, both of us unrelenting and sure of our claims. Only my information isn't simply a claim. It's fact.

Makayla takes a deep breath, then another, and another. "Look, Viking. This has been fun, but I think I should go."

She hands me her now empty beer bottle and walks away, leaving me speechless as I continue to lean against the wall.

That went downhill fast.

MAKAYLA

“Hey, wait up!”

I slow my steps and turn to walk backward. Inferno, who I met at Cherry’s and was reintroduced to earlier, is jogging toward me. I know I’m storming out like a child, but being told that I’m wrong about something I’ve believed my entire life, about something my mother taught me, hurts

I’m a scholar, a student of knowledge, and normally I’m open to conflicting ideas and opinions, but for some reason, I can’t handle it tonight.

“I’m leaving, Inferno.”

“What happened?” he asks when he catches up to me. “You and Viking seemed to be getting along so well.”

“We were,” I admit.

And it’s true. Being around Viking felt right. It felt familiar. I can’t explain it, but for the few hours I spent with him, I felt like I was exactly where I was meant to be, like the universe breathed a sigh of relief because we were together.

“Then why are you rushing out of here?”

“I’m just...” Just what? Being an idiot? Angry because Viking has differing thoughts than my own? Just fucking what? “I’m tired, that’s all,” I lie.

“Bullshit. What did he do?”

I can't stop the huff of laughter. I barely know Inferno, or anyone here for that matter, yet he's willing to take my side on some perceived slight from his club brother.

"Nothing. He's just not my type so I figured it was better to cut ties now than to get hurt later."

"Again, bullshit."

When I reach my car, I open the door, but I don't climb in. "Inferno, I appreciate you coming out to check on me, but with all due respect, you don't know me. Why are you pushing this?"

He shrugs. "Because I've been watching the two of you tonight, saw the way you looked at each other."

"So?"

"So," he says, his tone exaggerated. "I've known Viking for a very long time, and I've never seen him... happy. But he was tonight. With you."

My heart melts at his words, and that scares me.

What happens if you actually start to fall for this guy?

Sarah's words taunt me because I started to fall for him as soon as he charged at Jeff and declared me his woman. Most people would not be okay with the speed at which I fell, but it doesn't bother me.

I remember asking my mother how you know when you've found the right man, and she told me that when you know, you know.

And all night, I've known.

Until a few minutes ago.

"I really do have to go," I say and get into the driver's seat, shutting myself in and Inferno out.

Inferno's pleas with me to stay filter through the window, but when I back down the lane, they fade away into the night. I swipe at the wetness on my cheeks, not having realized I was crying, and mentally chastise myself for my emotions.

You're being ridiculous. You just met Viking.

As I drive toward town, a vehicle seems to appear out of nowhere behind me, its

headlights blinding in the rearview mirror. I immediately flash back to my trip to the clubhouse and the scene with Jeff, reminding myself that just because a car is behind me doesn't mean they're following me with nefarious intentions.

But then it continues behind me, turn for turn, mile for mile. I glance at the passenger floorboard at the crumbled note that I've left there since finding it, and my breath catches.

You'll regret this.

Just like earlier, my heart rate speeds up, and panic begins to creep in. Over and over again, I tell myself I'm being silly, that I have no enemies and there's no one out there who wants to harm me.

When I finally reach my street and the car doesn't turn with me, I realize that, again, my panic is unwarranted.



“HEY, SWEETHEART.”

I smile at the sound of my dad's voice. It's Sunday, our usual time to talk, but

today I'm extra glad to hear from him.

After arriving home last night, I tossed that damn note in the trash, locked myself

in the house, poured a glass of wine, and sat on the couch for hours, lost in my head. My thoughts were all over the place. One minute, I'm stewing over my conversation with Viking, and then the next I'm recalling all the memories of stories my mom used to tell me. Then my mind would switch gears, and my focus would be on the note or my dreams and how they've shifted, or how Viking made me feel.

In short, I was, and still am, a hot fucking mess.

“Hi, Dad.”

“You sound tired, baby girl,” he comments.

“It was a late night.”

“Oh yeah? Did you have a date or something?”

I force a laugh. “If books count as a date, then yeah.”

“Makayla, I worry about you.”

“So you’ve said,” I drawl. “But why are you worried now?”

He sighs, and it’s as if the weight of the world is in that sigh. “Because all you do is study and work at that library.”

And Cherry’s.

“As soon as I graduate, things will calm down.”

“If you say so.”

“So, how was your week?” I ask in an effort to change the subject.

Dad drones on about what he did every day, what he ate, and how he slept. I listen with half an ear, my mind on other things.

“Makayla, I asked you a question,” he says, pulling my attention back to our phone call.

“Sorry, what did you say?”

“I asked if you submitted your application for that museum job in Ireland. Wasn’t the deadline for it this week?”

“It was,” I confirm, but I don’t go into more detail, not wanting to explain why I wouldn’t go even if I was offered the position. “Hey, I wanted to ask you something.”

“Anything, baby girl.”

“I know you think they’re foolish, but do you remember the stories mom would tell me as a child?”

“Of course, I remember. Why?”

“Well, I’m doing my thesis, and I was hoping you could shed some light on a few things.”

“Ah, Makayla, your mom was always better with that stuff than I am. Mythology was *her* passion, just like you, but I’ll give it my best shot.”

“That’s all I ask.” I smile. Dad always ‘gives it his best shot’. I could ask him to explain to me why the sky is lime green, and even though he knows it’s not, he’d do his best to give me an answer. “Do you remember how Mom explained that men would get into Valhalla if they died bravely in battle?”

“Vaguely, yes.”

“Well, all of my research coincides with what she told me, but recently, a different opinion was shared with me.”

“Go on.”

“I’ve been told that, while some men die in battle, like during a war, and are escorted to Valhalla, that’s not all it takes to be considered a Warrior. That maybe, a Warrior would be chosen if they die protecting someone else at the expense of themselves.”

“And what’s wrong with that?” he asks. His tone isn’t condescending. He genuinely wants to know.

“It doesn’t make sense. Not just anyone can get into Valhalla, and based on that line of thinking, that’s exactly what happens.”

“Or…”

“Or what?”

“I know this is your area of expertise, but hear me out, okay?”

“Of course, Dad,” I say. “I asked you about this because I wanted your thoughts and to see if you remembered something I’m not.”

“Maybe you’re taking the information too literally.”

“How so?”

“War isn’t the only type of battle to be fought,” he explains. “A person can battle with their inner demons, and there’s the battle between right and wrong. Battle encompasses so many different things, so it stands to reason that, if someone dies protecting others, they’re dying during some type of battle, right?”

I mull over his words, and my heart sinks. He’s right. Maybe I’ve taken all of my mom’s stories too literally.

“You’re mom used to say that she loved mythology so much because it was open to interpretation. Sort of like art... The beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”

“She never said that to me.”

Dad chuckles. “She did. You just don’t remember.”

What else don’t I remember?

“Then why does the literature and research support what I’ve always thought to be true?”

“Bias. Interpretation. Hell, I don’t know,” he says. “Have you talked this over with Marsha? You’ve always valued her opinion and knowledge.”

“No, I haven’t.”

And honestly, I don’t know if I want to. I’m questioning everything I’ve ever known, and I worry that Marsha will only perpetuate my potentially wrong thought process because she interprets the myths and legends the same way I do.

“Well, I wouldn’t stress over it too much. I know you’ve almost got a doctorate on the subject, but there’s always more to be learned.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Anytime.”

After disconnecting the call, I make my way to my bedroom and curl up on the bed. I’m mentally exhausted, and a nap sounds amazing.

As I drift off to sleep, it’s to thoughts of Viking and everything I thought I knew.

VIKING

“Remind me why we’re doing this again?”

Reaper dismounts his bike as I do the same. It’s been a week since Makayla left the party angry with me, and I’ve wanted to go see her, to call her, but I’ve been too busy. We agreed to work with the human chapter of VRMC, and my time has been spent doing just that.

Fortunately, this is the last drug supply run they have in the area, so I should be free to get back to the mission once we’re done here.

“To blend,” I respond absently and grab my ax out of the saddlebag.

“Pretty sure that isn’t blending,” Inferno taunts, nodding toward my weapon.

“You’ve all got your guns and knives,” I begin. “And I have this.”

“Do you plan on standing out here chit-chatting like a couple of fucking school girls, or are you gonna back us up?” Trooper demands.

I scowl at his tone. He might be running this show, but I’m still his equal as far as rank. Besides, I’m the only one who talks to my men that way.

Inferno lifts his hand as if to conjure the flames, but I push it down and shake my head.

“None of that here,” I snap. “What the fuck are you thinking?”

Inferno narrows his eyes. “I’m thinking I’m sick and tired of these shitheads and their orders.”

“Excuse me?” Trooper demands as he stalks toward my VP.

Reaper steps between the two men and places his hands on both of their chests to hold them apart. Trooper’s eyes widen with the slightest hint of fear, and Inferno smirks because he knows Reaper’s touch can’t harm him.

“This is not the time or place,” Reaper states. “We’re all on edge and in shitty moods from being cooped up in such close quarters for the last nine days. But we’ve got this one last meet to finish and then we’ll all go our separate ways.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” Demo barks, joining us. “We’re stuck here until Viking gets his own shit handled.”

“But they aren’t,” Reaper says, nodding at Trooper and his brothers, who are standing behind him, their bodies tense. “So, hold it together a bit longer.”

It’s not lost on me that I should be the one calming frayed nerves, easing tensions. I’m the damn president. My only excuse is that my head is so scrambled with this Makayla crap, it’s hard to focus on much else.

And excuses don’t solve anything.

“He’s right,” I say, injecting authority into my tone. “Besides, despite being of two different worlds, we’re brothers. And brothers have each other’s backs, no matter what.”

No one responds, but Trooper finally nods and relaxes his stance. Reaper lowers his arms, and Inferno takes a step back.

“Let’s get inside before the seller gets cold feet,” my human counterpart demands before turning on his heel and striding into the abandoned warehouse.

We all follow Trooper, our weapons at the ready, just in case. All of the runs and deals we’ve completed up until this point have been textbook, but we have to be prepared for anything.

When we enter the giant room of an old production floor, there are seven men standing in a line, arms at their sides, guns dangling from their hands. And that's five men too many.

Like I said, we have to be prepared for anything.

"I was wondering if you were going to show up," the man in the middle says in a thick accent.

"Valhalla Rising MC always shows up, Stavos," Trooper says calmly.

"Yes, well, I would hope so. After all, we went through a lot to get these *supplies* here." He shifts his gaze from one man to the next until he's taken us all in. "I take it you have the money."

"It's all here," Mummy says, lifting the duffel he's carrying.

"I'll have to count it," Stavos says. "You understand."

"Of course," Trooper agrees. "I'd expect nothing less. But first, the product. I'd like to see it."

Stavos turns to the man on his right and nods. "Show them, Yani."

Yani grins. "If you'll come with me..."

He turns to walk to the back of the room where there are several crates stacked on top of each other.

"Follow him," Trooper orders Doom, and when Doom complies, Trooper turns his attention back to Stavos. "As soon as my man verifies that you brought the good stuff, we'll hand over the money."

"Are you implying that I might not be holding up my end of the deal?"

Trooper tilts his head. "We're criminals, Stavos. I have to consider every possibility. I know you understand that since you did the same by bringing more men than you originally indicated would be here."

Stavos smirks. "Touché."

“It looks good, Pres,” Doom calls from across the room.

“Time to pay up,” Stavos says.

“Give him the bag,” Trooper instructs Mummy.

Mummy breaks the line and strides to Stavos, unzipping the bag as he walks. When he reaches him, the man on Stavos’ left steps forward, raising his gun, and all hell breaks loose.

Gunfire erupts, and the shots ring out in the empty cavernous building. I charge forward, my ax raised above my head, and bring it down on Stavos’ head before he has a chance to pull the trigger of his own weapon.

He drops to the floor, and I grip my ax tight to release it from his skull as he falls. I don’t know how long the fighting lasts, but when it’s over and silence fills the space, Stavos and his men are dead while those of us in the VRMC are walking away, for the most part, unscathed.

“What the fuck was that?” Acid demands when we spill out into the gravel lot where the bikes and van are parked.

“It seems Stavos had a traitor in his midst,” Stoner comments in a tone that screams frustration. He shrugs. “It happens.”

“Mummy and Rave, go grab the goods and the cash,” Trooper demands. “Take the dolly out of the van so you can get it all in one trip. We need to get the hell out of here.”

The two of them walk back inside, and once the door slams shut behind them, I grin at Trooper. “That was fun.”

He chuckles. “I’m glad you approve.” He reaches out to shake my hand. “Thanks for the backup.”

“We agreed to help you, and we honor our word.”

Our attention is pulled toward the door when it swings open and Rave and Mummy return. Doom and Demo assist them in getting the crates into the van.

“I have one last favor to ask,” Trooper says as I’m mounting my Harley.

“What’s that?”

He nods at Inferno. “Can he torch the place?”

Inferno is at my side in the blink of an eye, a grin splitting his face. “Yeah, Pres... can I?”

“Since when did you start acting like a five-year-old?” I ask with a laugh.

“Aw, c’mon, man,” Inferno whines, making me question why he’s my VP. “One fire, that’s it.”

I glance around to make sure there are no witnesses, and when I’m satisfied that him using his gift won’t cause a scene, I nod. “Go for it.”

Ten minutes later, we’re riding away from the building, which is fully engulfed in flames. Trooper and his men point their bikes west to head back to their own turf in Washington, and my boys return to the clubhouse.

I, on the other hand, ride straight to town and a certain gentlemen’s club. I’m finally free of obligations that require my full attention, and I have an apology to make.

I might have a mission to complete, but I don’t have to hurt Makayla in the process, and I fear that’s exactly what I did.

MAKAYLA

“I wish I’d been wrong.”

Sarah and I are both working behind the bar tonight at Cherry’s. I have one performance in an hour, but Sarah isn’t dancing this evening.

“But you weren’t,” I tell her. “And it’s fine.”

I’d hoped that Viking would reach out, but he hasn’t. It’s been seven days since I saw him, and five since I started telling myself I didn’t give a damn. Sure, I could go to the clubhouse and see him, but why should I? Clearly, he wasn’t falling like I did.

“I hate to say it, but I—”

“Told me so,” I finish for her. “I know.”

“You never really did tell me what happened,” she comments.

She’s asked me several times, and I’ve managed to resist answering her. Mostly because I feel like a fool and am not too keen on admitting that.

“It was nothing, really,” I reply, giving her the same response I have all week.

The conversation ends when Tempe’s set ends and customers rush the bar. As I dispense drinks and make change, I push Viking from my mind and focus on the work. Before I know it, there’s only ten minutes until my routine, and I have to change into my Valkyrie costume.

In the dressing room, I quickly put my hair in braids and touch up my makeup. And just as I'm slipping the leather wristbands on to complete the look, there's a knock on the door.

"Come in," I holler, knowing it isn't one of the other dancers. They don't knock.

The door opens, and Brigg sticks his head through the opening. "Hey, Makayla. There's a man out here asking for you."

"Who?"

"Says his name is Viking."

My stomach drops. Viking? What is he doing here?

"I have to get on stage," I tell Brigg. "Tell him he can either wait or leave. The choice is his."

"Uh, yeah. I'm pretty sure he's not going anywhere. I already tried to tell him you were busy, and he demanded I tell you he's here."

"Brigg, you're the bouncer here. If he's causing a scene, make him leave."

"Oh, he's not causing a scene," he says. "But he is pretty insistent that he see you."

I heave a sigh. "Fine. I'll talk to him when I'm done."

Brigg steps aside when I exit the dressing room and walks with me to the back of the stage.

"I'll tell him," he assures me before returning to his post at the front door.

The music starts, and I step onto the stage. The spotlights are blinding, which is good because I find myself trying to search for the biker. I'm pretty sure I'd fall flat on my face if I spotted him watching me.

My routine goes seamlessly, but things take a turn when the second song begins.

"Show us some titty, baby!"

I might not be able to make out anyone's face, but I recognize that voice. It belongs to the man that Brigg threw out not all that long ago.

How the hell did he get in here?

When a customer is thrown out of Cherry's, they're banned for life. He must have gotten in when Brigg came back to the dressing room.

"C'mon, sugar, give us a show!" he calls out.

I freeze, the music stops, and the lights dim.

Before Brigg can reach the guy to toss him out on his ass again, Viking is there, grabbing the asshole by the collar and hauling him out of his chair.

"Don't you ever speak to a woman like that," Viking snarls.

"I'll speak any way I want," the man counters. "This is a free country."

Viking grins, but there's malice behind his tilted lips. "You're right. Which is why I'm free to do this."

He drags the man by his hair to the door and yanks it open. Lifting his leg, he lands a kick to his chest and launches him outside.

"Mea is mine, and if you come anywhere near her again, I'll end you," he shouts.

Mea?

"You'll regret this!" I hear the man yell before the door closes.

You'll regret this.

You'll regret this.

Could it be?

Viking turns to face me, and I can see the rage lingering in his eyes, even from a distance. Needing a minute to myself, I rush off the stage and thank God Steve isn't here tonight. Not

only was a scene caused in his establishment because of me, but I stopped dancing mid-set, and he doesn't like that.

“What the hell was that?” Sarah demands as she races through the door just as I'm flopping down on the stool in front of my makeup station.

“I...” I shake my head. “I don't know.”

“Wasn't that the guy that Brigg got rid of last week?”

“I think so, yeah.”

“And Viking?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Not gonna lie, it was kinda hot watching him stand up for you like that.”

I swallow. It was hot. That's twice now that he's stepped in and called me his.

“Hey, did you hear him call me Mea?” I ask.

Sarah shakes her head. “No. All I heard was him say you were his.”

I huff out a breath. “Yeah, I heard that too.”

“I thought he was gonna do far worse th—”

“Makayla, are you okay?” Viking asks as he flies into the dressing room, Brigg on his heels.

“I tried to stop him,” Brigg says as he grabs Viking's arm. Viking easily shakes him off, but Brigg doesn't give up that easily. “Want me to kick his ass to the curb?”

I dismiss his concern. “It's fine, Brigg. He can stay.”

“You sure?”

I nod and glance at Sarah. “Can you give us a minute?”

My friend darts her eyes to Viking and back again. “Sure thing, but I'll be right outside if you need me.”

I smile. “Thanks.”

Brigg and Sarah retreat to the hallway, and Viking shuts the door behind them before facing me again.

“Are you okay?” he repeats.

Ignoring his question, I ask one of my own. “What are you doing here, Viking?”

He thrusts his hand through his hair and begins to pace. “I...” It’s a few more seconds before he spits out a full sentence. “I came to apologize.”

“For what?”

“Upsetting you last week. That wasn’t my intention, and I’m sorry.”

I rise from the stool and move toward him. “Do you know why I got upset?”

“No.”

I take a deep breath, mentally prepare myself to give a piece of myself to a man I barely know.

“My mom used to tell me bedtime stories as a kid.” I smile fondly. “Every single one revolved around Norse mythology and, more specifically, Valhalla. I soaked up everything she ever said on the topic, fell in love with the rich history and incredible pictures she painted with her words.”

Viking takes a step closer to me. “Sounds like you had a very good childhood.”

“I did. The best. And then I turned her stories into my life. I became obsessed. Still am, actually,” I admit. “Between her stories and my schooling, I’ve spent so much of my life learning about Valhalla, dreaming about the heaven Odin created. I’ve read countless books, journals, and research papers. I’ve learned everything I could about it.”

“And then I came along and told you that you were wrong,” he says quietly.

I lock eyes with him. “That hurt, Viking, but not for the reason you think.”

He reaches for my hand, and I let him lift it to link our fingers together. “Tell me why it hurt.”

“Because in the span of a few minutes, you completely tore apart everything I thought I knew, everything my mom taught me.”

“I didn’t m—”

I hold up my free hand to silence him. “I’m not done.” He nods for me to continue. “I was hurt, not because I could be wrong, but because my mom is who inspired me, who made me who I am.” I swallow past the lump in my throat that always forms when I have to utter my next words. “She died several months ago, and I just... I miss her, ya know?”

Viking lifts his hand and rubs his thumb under my eye to catch a falling tear, and that is my undoing. I crumble in on myself, sobbing out the pain of losing my mom like it happened minutes ago and not months.

“Let it out,” he croons as he pulls me into his chest and wraps his arms around me. “It’s okay, you’re okay.”

I don’t know how long he holds me, but when the crying eases, he leans back and looks me in the eye. I try to avert my gaze, but he grips my chin.

“Don’t hide from me,” he growls.

“I’m n-not usually s-so emotional,” I manage to say in between hiccupping sighs.

“There’s nothing wrong with emotion. Sometimes, crying is the only thing a person can do.”

I nod.

“When is your shift over? I think going home would do you a world of good right now.”

“My set ended my shift,” I say.

“Then let me take you home,” he coerces. “You’re too upset to drive.”

I consider his offer. It’s tempting to let him take care of me, but I’m a big girl. Then again, the man he threw out

earlier could still be out there, and I'm pretty sure it was him who left that fucking note on my car.

What if he's outside waiting for me?

Temptation and a good dose of fear win the day, and I finally nod. "Okay." I frown. "But what about my car?"

"I'll have one of my brothers bring it to your place."

"Okay."

When Viking steps into the hall to let me change, I realize that Brigg and Sarah are no longer standing guard. I quickly put my street clothes back on and grab my bag before joining Viking and letting him guide me outside to the parking lot.

"Ever ridden a motorcycle before?" he asks when we reach his bike.

"Nope."

"You're gonna love it." He grips my hand and guides me closer to the machine. "Swing your leg over and straddle the seat. And watch these pipes," he says pointing to the chrome near my feet. "You don't wanna burn yourself."

Once I'm settled, Viking takes my bag and shoves it in the leather pouch on the side of the Harley. Then he climbs on in front of me, his body heat seeping into my bones and making me feel... safe.

"Hold on," he instructs before starting the engine. "And tap me on the corresponding shoulder when we're coming up on a turn."

I wrap my arms around his waist and do as he says. He goes slow at first, but once we get away from traffic, he opens up the throttle, and the wind whips my hair around my head.

Way too fast, we arrive at my house, and Viking parks on the edge of the driveway, leaving room for my car.

"So, what did ya think?" he asks as he helps me off the bike.

My legs wobble slightly, and Viking steadies me with hands on my shoulders.

“That was incredible,” I say. “When can we go again?”

Viking chuckles. “Any time you want.”

I grin, the shit storm from earlier forgotten. “Do you wanna come in?” I ask.

“Sure.”

I don’t know what I hope to accomplish or what I expect, if anything, by inviting him in, but what I do know is I’m not ready for him to leave. Not yet.

After unlocking the front door, I usher him into the living room. “Can I get you anything to drink?”

“Water’s fine.”

I toss my bag onto the couch and go to the kitchen to grab two bottles of water from the fridge. When I return, he’s standing with his shoulders squared, his fists clenched at his sides, and his stare penetrating a picture on the wall. The white surfaces are covered in photos of Ireland and Scotland and art depicting Valhalla.

“Viking?”

“Hmm?”

He doesn’t look at me, intensely focused on the image. I walk to him so I can see his face, and when I do, my heart skips a beat.

Viking, the *dangerous* biker, looks incredibly... sad.

“What’s wrong?”

ODIN

“You knew this would happen.”

Once again, I’m enclosed in my office with Kára, and we’re watching Viking on the monitors. I could lie to her and deny any knowledge that this is how things would play out, but I won’t. What’s the point?

Rather than speak, I simply nod.

“How do you expect Viking, or any Warrior for that matter, to adhere to the Code of Conduct when you throw so many obstacles in their way, so much temptation?”

I sigh and gesture for Kára to have a seat. She hesitates, but ultimately, her loyalty wins out. After she sits on the sofa along the wall, I move to stand in front of her.

“Viking has made no secret of his distaste for me, has he?”

“No, Sir.”

“Yet he remains dedicated to Valhalla, adheres to the Code for the most part.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Despite this, there’s always been a piece of himself that he’s held back.”

Kára dips her head. “Yes, Sir.”

“I’m doing this because Viking has earned it. He and Mea belong together. But I also have a reputation to protect. If I made things too easy, what would the other VRMC brothers think? Would they assume I’ll do the same for them? Would

they think I've gone soft?" I shrug. "Luckily, we don't have to find out because Viking won't break the rules."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that, Sir. His love for Mea slash Makayla goes deeper than you could possibly imagine."

"Okay, so maybe he will break the rules, but he'll think twice about it for a bit longer."

"And if he cracks sooner than you expect?" she asks. "What happens then?"

"Nothing, Kára. Nothing happens. Viking will not be punished in any way as long as Valhalla remains protected. I think thousands of years without your soulmate is punishment enough, don't you?"

VIKING

*W*hat's wrong?

Makayla's question tumbles around in my skull. I have no clue how to answer her, how to explain what's caused the shift in my mood without telling her the truth. And if I do that, I'll likely scare the shit out of her.

It's a lose-lose situation.

"Viking?" she prods as she turns to set the bottles of water on the coffee table. "Talk to me."

I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out.

Code number eight: Cannot reveal your true self to anyone.

"I, um..." I clear my throat and nod at the image. "I know this place."

"You do?"

I nod.

"I mean, it's not like it's a secret place, so it's not surprising that it's fa—"

"No, Makayla," I interject. "I *know* this place."

Turning to face her, I watch as confusion enters her eyes. "How?"

"It's..." I heave a sigh. "Fuck, I can't do this."

When I whirl around to leave, she grabs my arm and halts me. I glance over my shoulder, silently asking her what she

wants from me.

“Don’t run,” she urges. “I did that last week, and...” She drops her gaze for a moment before lifting it back to mine. “And I regret it.”

“I can’t...” I shake my head to clear my thoughts. “There’s so much I want to tell you, but I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Because I have rules to follow,” I say honestly.

“Rules?” she repeats. “Like, in the club?”

One corner of my mouth tips up. If only it were that simple. “Something like that.”

“Okay, so is it breaking the rules to sit and stay a while?”

“No.”

She tugs on my arm, guiding me to the couch, and we both sit. “Is it breaking the rules to talk to me?”

“Depends on what I say.”

“Well, we could play twenty questions,” she suggests.

“Twenty questions?”

“Yeah, you know, where I ask you a question, and then you ask me one, and so on.” Makayla shrugs. “It’s a good way to get to know each other, and if there’s a question you can’t answer because of these rules, then don’t answer.”

I consider it for a moment and decide there’s no harm in innocent questions. “Okay. Go for it.”

“Hmm.” She taps her chin as she tries to think of her first question. “Is Viking your real name?”

“No.”

“Then what is it?”

“Isn’t it my turn?”

She sighs. “Fair enough. Shoot.”

“Do you feel like there’s something between us?”

“Wow,” she says a little breathlessly. “You’re just diving right into the deep end, aren’t you?” I shrug, and she continues. “Honestly, yes, I do. It’s scary as shit and makes no sense with how short a time I’ve known you, but there’s this...”

“Connection,” I supply when she pauses.

“Exactly. I feel like I’ve known you my entire life.”

“I feel that too.”

“Okay, my turn.”

“Hit me.”

“What’s your real name?” she asks, and I can’t stop the laugh that bellows out of me.

Once the laughing subsides, I reply. “Leif. What’s your favorite color?” I ask, warming up to the game.

“Yellow.”

I expect her to launch right into the next question, but she hesitates.

“Giving up already?” I tease, reaching out to caress her cheek as if it’s the most natural thing in the world.

“No. Um, who’s Mea?”

I freeze, my hand hovering an inch from her face. “What?” I croak.

“Back at Cherry’s, when you threw that guy out, you called me Mea,” she explains. “Who’s Mea?”

“I... She... I called you Mea?”

“You did. You also said I was yours, which is the second time you’ve said that, I might add.”

I search her eyes for any hint of panic or annoyance by my claiming her, but there is none. Breathing a sigh of relief, I make a snap decision.

Fuck this.

I rise from the couch and return to stand in front of the image of a place from my past.

“That’s my home,” I finally say. “Where I lived my entire life.”

“I don’t understand,” she says as she joins me.

“No, I don’t suppose you do.” I turn to face her. “Makayla, I’m not who you think I am.”

She takes a step back, uncertainty tainting her expression. “What do you mean?”

If I’m going to break the rules, it’s now or never.

“I’m from another time, another place.”

She narrows her eyes. “Explain, please.”

I nod at the picture. “I lived there back in the nine hundreds, with my wife, Mea.”

Her entire body stiffens. “But that would... No, that’s not possible.”

“Our village was raided by Vikings, and I died trying to protect Mea, but she also died.”

“Are you... That would mean you’re dead,” she says unnecessarily.

“Yes.”

“But you’re standing right in front of me.”

“Growing up, you believed all the stories your mom told you, right?”

Makayla looks at me suspiciously. “Yes.”

“Then is it such a stretch that I’m telling you the truth?”



Makayla

YOU CAN TRUST HIM, Makayla.

A voice rushes through my ears as a sense of calm washes over me. What Viking is telling me is extraordinary, but how can I deny the overwhelming desire to believe him?

He'd never hurt you. It will all be okay.

“You’re dead?” I ask, needing him to say it again.

“Yes, technically.”

I flatten my palm against his chest, needing to feel for myself. His heart beats wildly, and I yank my hand back, startled.

“You have a heartbeat.”

“Yes, I do. Here in the human world,” he admits. “But back home, it does not beat.”

“And home is where exactly?”

“Valhalla.”

He's telling you the truth.

The voice in my head won't quit, won't let me believe anything other than what Viking tells me.

“You’re a Warrior?”

“I am.”

“So you’re not in an MC?”

“I am. I’m the president. But we ride up in the heavens on streets paved in gold.”

“Um, okay. Then what are you doing here?”

“Odin sent me.”

“Odin, as in the Norse god?”

“One and the same.”

I begin to pace, doing my best not to freak out. And still, the voice in my head is relentless.

Trust him, Makayla.

Logic tells me I should kick Viking out and lock the door behind him, but I can't. I wasn't lying when I said I felt a

connection to him. Okay, so maybe he's a little looney tunes, but the heart wants what the heart wants, right?

"I'm not looney tunes."

I whip my head around with wide eyes, and he looks as surprised as I am. "What?"

"Uh, that's never happened before," Viking says.

"What?"

"Me reading someone's mind. Usually, it's my mind being read."

And how the fuck am I supposed to ignore that? I know I didn't speak out loud.

"Viking, I'm not really sure what to do with this information," I admit.

"What can I do to prove to you that I'm telling the truth?" he asks.

Kiss him. Kiss him, and you'll see the truth.

That damn voice.

Without giving it too much thought, I move forward and reach up to touch his cheek. I can't help but wonder how he can feel so warm when he's dead, but I don't bother asking. I'm not sure I'd understand anyway.

Rising to my tiptoes, I lean forward and close my eyes as I press my lips to his. And in a flash, image after image after image slams into my mind. Like memories on a slide show, I see Leif as a boy, a teenager, then as a young man. I get a crystal-clear illustration of him fighting off numerous men as he wields an ax, and I see his death.

Viking pulls away from me, his breathing ragged.

Do dead people breathe?

"I can't," he says bitterly.

"Y-you can't?"

"Fuck, Makayla, I want you. There is nothing I want more. But it's forbidden for

me to have physical relations with a human.”

Push him. It'll be okay.

Listening to the voice, I ask, “Wasn’t it forbidden to tell me who you are?”

Viking’s nostrils flare, and before I can react, he has me pinned against the wall.

“I don’t know how this is going to work,” he says, his voice thick with need.

I nip at his chin. “Why don’t we find out?”

Viking slants his mouth over mine and darts his tongue between my lips. His hands slide down my hips to the hem of my tank top, and he pulls it over my head. Next, he pops the button on my jeans and slides them, along with my thong, over my hips.

I frantically tug at his shirt, and he grips it from the back of the neck and yanks it

over his head before tossing it to the floor. The only time our lips part is when the material has to go between our bodies.

“Pants,” I urge. “Take ‘em off.”

He does, taking his boxer briefs along with them. When he’s naked, I push him back a step so I can take in his body.

Holy shit, he’s impressive. Every inch of him is defined and most of his skin has ink on it. And that cock? It’s thick and hard, and I’m desperate for it.

“Like what you see?”

“Very much,” I purr.

Reaching behind me, I unhook my bra and let the straps fall down my arms. Viking cups them in his palms, massaging the flesh and tweaking my nipples.

“I’ve known you were beautiful from the second I saw you,” he growls. “But I had no idea that you were a goddess.”

He presses his body to mine, holding me tight to the wall. “I need you, Makayla. So fucking bad.”

“Take me, Leif.” His name slips easily from my lips, and his dick jerks between us when I say it.

“Say that again,” he commands.

“Leif.”

“No one’s called me that in a long time.”

“I don’t ha—”

He settles a finger over my lips. “I like how it sounds coming from you. Only from you.”

“Leif,” I repeat.

He lifts me off my feet, and I wrap my legs around his waist. His cock grazes my clit, and my body jolts with pleasure. Viking kisses me soundly, stealing my breath and my sanity.

My nerve endings buzz as liquid fire blazes through my system. I reach down and line him up with my entrance.

“It’s going to be okay,” I say against his lips. “Fuck me, Leif.”

And fuck me he does. He surges inside, and my walls clamp down on his cock. Part of me waits for explosions of some kind with how worried he was, but they don’t come. At least not any that will harm either one of us.

Viking thrusts in and out, grunting with each slap of our flesh. He stretches me, filling me to what should be an impossible degree. His pelvis rubs my clit as he pummels me against the wall, and lights dance behind my eyelids.

“Holy fire pits, I’m gonna come,” he grits out from behind clenched teeth.

I dig my heels into his ass to hold him close to me and rotate my hips to increase the friction. The world around us fades away, and my orgasm crashes through me like a freight train.

I shout out my release, and Viking captures my mouth as he groans with his own. His shaft pulses inside me, and warmth seems to settle into the very marrow of my bones.

After the shockwaves cease, I slide down his body and set my feet on the floor. I'm vibrating from head to toe, and Viking cages me in with his hands on the wall beside my head.

"Why did that feel so right?" he whispers harshly. "So perfect?"

At this moment, I recognize the voice in my head for what it was. I have no doubt whatsoever that it was my soul guiding me in the right direction.

"Because it was."

MAKAYLA

“Are you heading home?”

I tuck my cell between my shoulder and ear as I walk across the parking lot on campus. Viking called right when my last class ended. I haven't seen him since the other night because of school and work, so phone calls have been a staple of our relationship.

Relationship?

Yep. We're in a relationship. There's no other way to describe it. I haven't told anyone because I know they won't understand, but I will. In time.

“Yeah. I've gotta get some research done.”

“So you wouldn't be up for some company tonight?” he asks suggestively.

Oh, but I would.

“I think I could be persuaded.”

“Well, it's two o'clock now. How 'bout I come over around nine? Does that give you enough time to get stuff done?”

I mentally recap what is on my list of topics to review. “Should be.” I reach my car, and a piece of paper on the windshield catches my eye. “What the...”

“Makayla, what's wrong?” Viking asks.

“There's a note on my car.”

Grabbing the slip of copy paper, I unlock the driver's door and slide into it. When I open the folded note, my breath catches.

You're pushing your luck

"A note?"

"Yeah, um..." I glance around the lot and don't spot anyone. "I thought the first one was a fluke, but now I'm not so sure."

"The first one?"

I heave a sigh and lean back against the seat. "Not that long ago, I came out of my house to a note on my car that said 'you'll regret this'. The one now says 'you're pushing your luck'."

"Send me your location," he demands. "I'm coming to get you."

"No, no. I'll be fine."

"Makayla," he growls. "Send me that location. Now."

I let out a pent-up breath in relief. "Okay. I'll see you when you get here."

Fifteen minutes later, the rumble of a motorcycle breaks through the otherwise silent air. I twist in my seat and see Viking riding down the lanes, coming to a stop behind my car. He's off his bike and at my window like a shot.

"Thanks for coming," I say after rolling my window down.

"I protect what's mine," he says simply. "And make no mistake, Makayla, you're mine. No matter what happens, you're mine, and you always will be."

"What would happen?" I ask, suddenly afraid for an entirely different reason.

Viking tips his head back and looks at the sky for a moment before locking his eyes on mine. "I'm going to follow

you to the clubhouse. Until we figure out what's going on with these notes, you're staying with me."

"You didn't answer my question, Viking."

"And I'm not going to, not right now." He reaches through the window and cups my cheek. "We can talk about this later, once you're safe, okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

He leans in and smacks a kiss on my lips. "I'll be right behind you."

He starts back to his bike, but before I can get my window up, I hear my name being called. I shift my gaze to the front of my vehicle and see Jeff standing there.

"I was shouting your name, but you didn't hear me over the hormones rushing in your ears," he says, his tone smug.

Did he leave the note?

No, he couldn't have. It was the customer at the bar that said the words from the first note.

"What do you want, Jeff?"

"You better have a damn good reason for talking to her."

Viking and I speak at the same time, and I glare at him. I can handle this.

"What do you want?" I ask again.

"I wanted to apologize again for scaring you last week. Honestly, I didn't mean to."

"It's fine." Deciding to grab the bull by the horns, so to speak, I lift the paper still

clutched in my hand. "Did you leave this on my car for me?"

Jeff's forehead wrinkles in confusion. "What is it?"

I thrust it out the window to show him. He scans the short note, and frowns.

"Someone's threatening you?" he asks.

“And I’m handling it,” Viking snarls.

Ignoring him, Jeff goes on. “You should take this to the police, Makayla. There are crazy people in the world.”

“Yeah, I’ll think about it.”

“If there’s anything I can do, let me know.”

“Thanks, Jeff. I appreciate it.”

“No problem. I know I can be a dick, but I’m not a bad guy. And I really am sorry for scaring you.”

“It’s fine.”

Viking growls from his position a few feet away, and Jeff rolls his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, I’m going.”

He walks away, and I lean out the window. “What the hell, Viking?”

“I don’t like him,” he says, his tone surly.

“No shit. I don’t either. But he wasn’t doing anything wrong or being an asshole for once. Besides, I can take care of myself.”

It’s not lost on me that he’s here because he rushed to my aid... for the third time.

“I’ll follow you to the clubhouse,” Viking says, and mounts his bike, effectively ending the conversation.

As much as his possessiveness annoys me, there’s no denying it’s hot as hell.

I put the car in reverse when he moves his bike out of the way. It takes longer than I anticipated to get to the big brick building in the boonies, but it gives me a chance to calm down, and when we arrive, my anger is gone.

“I’ve gotta meet with the guys, but you can have a seat at the bar or watch TV while you wait,” Viking says as he ushers me inside.

“I’ll do some work,” I tell him and make my way to the couch.

“Okay, make yourself at home.”

He heads down the hall, and I can hear voices floating through the air when a door is opened. I don't hear it for long though, because the distinct click of the door shutting and being locked quickly follows.

I drop my bag onto the sofa and as I'm lowering myself to the cushion, a female voice startles me.

“Finally, we meet.”

VIKING

“What are we supposed to do about it?”

I’ve been meeting with the brothers for an hour now, and we’re no closer to agreeing on how to handle these mysterious notes Makayla’s had placed on her car.

“So you’re okay with her getting hurt?” I demand. “Because I’m not.”

“Brother, that’s not what Demo is saying,” Inferno states. “All we’re trying to figure out is how to complete our mission *and* protect her without pissing off the heavens.”

I have to come clean with them, divulge a secret I’ve held onto for so long. I’m not sure how it’ll go across, but I don’t have a choice. Not if I want their help.

“Odin owes me this,” I bite out.

Inferno leans back in his chair and arches a brow. But he doesn’t speak. I’ve said the same thing to him hundreds of times, and never explained.

Acid has no such reticence. “Pres, you always say that, but you don’t fucking elaborate.”

“Unburden yourself, man,” Demo says, sounding far wiser than he is.

“We’re supposed to trust you, have your back,” Reaper adds. “How can we do

that if we don’t have all the facts?”

It's true, what they're saying. Which is why I'm going to finally tell them.

"Before my death, I was married," I begin. "My wife's name was Mea."

"What does that have to do with what Odin owes you?" Inferno queries.

"When I was escorted into Valhalla, all I wanted was to go back to her, to Mea. I begged and pleaded with Kára to send me back. And as you know, that's not possible." I shrug. "But I was promised that Mea and I would be reunited one day. Odin has kept me waiting for decade after decade after decade."

"And you think Mak—"

The door flies open, banging against the wall, and Makayla rushes into the room, eyes dark with rage.

"I'm your wife?!" she shouts.

"Oh shit," Demo mutters.

"She's pissed, Pres," Reaper comments unhelpfully.

"Makayla is Mea?" Inferno asks, finishing his question.

The woman of the hour storms across the room and stabs a finger into my chest. "How could you keep that from me?"

Before I can answer, a shimmer glimmers in the air, and Kára appears. She smiles apologetically at me. "Sorry."

"This keeps getting better and better," Acid quips. "Hey, Kára."

"Acid," she acknowledges.

Demo stands and turns to look at the door. "Are you alone, or is Mist out there somewhere?"

"Still making good use of the brain in your pants, I see," Kára teases.

Demo adjusts himself, already hard at the thought of his Valkyrie. I guess I should be thanking the gods that he has clothes on. I know that's been hard on him, but he's managed

to remain dressed the majority of the time we've been in the human world, and I'm grateful.

"Shut up!" Makayla screams, and all eyes shift to her. "That's better. Now, someone please explain to me how I'm married and didn't even know it."

"That's not what I said," Kára comments.

"What exactly *did* you say?" I snarl, truly angry with Kára for the first time since my death day.

"Well, first I explained who I am." Kára shrugs. "She was a little freaked when I just appeared out of nowhere."

"What sane person wouldn't be freaked out by that?" Makayla shrieks.

"She's got a point," Demo says.

"Shut up."

Makayla and I speak simultaneously, and Demo only rolls his eyes.

"Anyway, as I was saying," Kára continues. "I explained who I am, and once she calmed down, I told her that she's your soulmate."

"Wife," Makayla corrects. "You told me I'm his wife reincarnated."

"Which doesn't mean you're married. It means you *were*."

"Close enough." Makayla glares at me. "Why the hell didn't you tell me?"

I heave a sigh. "Because, I wasn't one hundred percent sure," I admit. "And it doesn't matter."

"How can it not matter?"

"I'm dead, Makayla," I bite out. "I'm a Warrior, and you're a human. A very *alive* human. When my mission is complete, I'll transition back to Valhalla, and you'll still be here."

"That's not entirely true," Kára says quietly.

"Say what?" I demand.

Kára sighs dramatically, and flops into a chair. “I have it on good authority that the two of you can and will be together.”

“How?” I ask, hope soaring.

“When your mission is complete, you can both transition to Valhalla. Makayla will become a Valkyrie, and you’ll return to the work the VRMC does.”

“Wait a damn minute,” Makayla snaps. “Who says I want to go to Valhalla? You can’t make that decision for me. And what mission?” She locks her eyes on mine. “What is she talking about, Leif.”

“You told her your real name?” Inferno asks incredulously.

“Damn, bro, that’s serious,” Reaper adds.

“How did I not know that was your name?” Demo asks.

“One person at a motherfucking time,” I bark. “Yes, I told her my real name. Yes, it’s serious. And I don’t know, Demo. You’ve never asked, and it’s not like we sit around and talk about this shit.” I turn to Makayla. “My mission was you, *is* you. Odin sent me here with the assignment of making sure you got your research about Valhalla correct.”

“Oh my God,” she seethes.

“Odin,” Kára says.

“What?”

“You said, ‘Oh my God’, and I think you meant ‘Oh my Odin’. Really, Makayla, you’re going to have to learn these things if you’re going to live in Valhalla. Odin is—”

I silence Kára with a look of warning.

“Was anything you’ve said to me true?” Makayla asks as if she wasn’t interrupted. “Or is this all one big setup, one giant joke?” She narrows her eyes. “Have you been leaving those damn notes?”

“What? No, of course not.” I close the distance between us fully expecting her to back away, but she doesn’t. She might be angry, but she can’t ignore the pull between our souls, the

visceral need to be together. “Makayla, I have been honest with you.” She snorts derisively. “Okay, I’ve been honest with you since the night we slept together and I to—”

“You fucked her?” Acid gripes.

I reach under the table and yank my ax off the magnet I placed there when we first arrived. Launching it at Acid’s head, a sick satisfaction rolls through me when his skull splits in two, and his chair tips backward. He lands with his feet in the air.

“Holy shit!” Makayla cries. “You killed him. Why would you ki—”

Her mouth slams shut when Acid’s feet start moving. Seconds later, he backflips off his overturned seat and stands. His head is fully intact as if nothing happened.

“You will show respect when speaking to or about my woman,” I snarl. “If it happens again, you won’t have a chance to regenerate because you’ll be in the Fire Pit.”

“I... what...” Makayla shakes her head, and I notice her face has drained of all color. “How did you do that?”

I wrap my arms around her and pull her to my chest. She doesn’t fight me.

“We’re dead, my love,” I whisper in her ear. “If we get hurt, we heal. If a body part is severed, it regenerates.”

“And it fucking hurts to regenerate,” Acid complains, rubbing his head.

“Let that be a lesson to you,” I bite out, glaring at him over her head. “Don’t test me where she’s concerned.”

“I don’t understand any of this,” she mumbles. “It’s all too much.”

I ease her back and smile. “Do you love me?”

“What? How can you ask me that, Viking? We barely know each other, and you’re talking about love?”

“You’re my wife. How could I not love you?”

“I’m not your wife, Viking. Mea was your wife. I’m not Mea.”

“But your soul and Mea’s soul are one and the same,” Kára says, rising from the chair and coming to stand next to Makayla. “You felt a connection to Viking the moment you saw him, did you not?”

“Yes, but—”

“But nothing.” My Valkyrie rests her palm on Makayla’s cheek. “The two of you have been destined to be together since the beginning of time. I don’t know why Odin made you both wait lifetimes to find one another again, but here we are.”

“You make it sound like I don’t have a choice in any of this.”

“You always have a choice,” I tell her. “Always.”

It would destroy me if she chose to stay here in the human world, but I won’t force her to go to Valhalla. I won’t make her choose me.

Makayla shoves away from me slowly and walks backward toward the door, shaking her head as she goes.

“I need time, Viking. I... I have to go.”

She spins on her heel and races out the door. I take a step to go after her, but Kára settles a hand on my arm.

“Let her go,” she commands.

I stare at the Valkyrie who has always been there for me, who has guided me when I was lost, helped me when I was broken.

“I can’t lose her, Kára,” I whisper brokenly.

“And you won’t,” she insists. “Trust me.”

Trust. It’s such a hard thing to give, and a very easy thing to lose.

“Viking, you’re soulmates,” Inferno inserts from behind me. “It’ll work out.”

It has to. Or I’m sending myself to the Fire Pits.

MAKAYLA

How is this my life?

I drive home on autopilot, my mind racing with the info dump I just experienced. When I pull into my driveway, I can't help but wonder how I got here.

As I'm walking into the house, my phone rings. I grab it from my purse and groan. Viking's name flashes on the screen. I tap the red icon and send him to voicemail. I asked for time, and he needs to give me time.

Before I even make it to the kitchen to get the bottle of wine in my fridge, my cell dings with a notification. I order myself not to look and see what it is, but my body ignores my brain's commands. There's a text from Viking, and I can't keep from opening it to read what he sent.

Viking: I'll give you the time you need, but there's still danger from whoever left those notes. Please be careful.

As much as I want to ignore his request, I can't.

Seems there's a lot of things I can't do at the moment.

Me: I will.

I hit send and toss the device on the counter, then I get the bottle of wine, a glass, the container of leftover Chinese food, and a fork and take all three to the bathroom. I hear my phone ping again, and this time, I'm able to ignore it.

While I soak in a bubble bath, I contemplate and rehash the last few hours. When my wine and food are gone, I rest my head on the porcelain tub and close my eyes.

Your soul and Mea's soul are one and the same.

Kára's words taunt me as I drift off to sleep, exhausted to my core.

"I'm not ready, Leif."

My husband stares at me as we do our best to ignore the chaos outside of our small home. The Vikings are close, and it won't be long before their raiding reaches us.

"Mea," he scolds with a finger to his lips. "Quiet."

A tear falls down my cheek. Leif and I have only been married for a short time, and I'm not ready to give him up.

"Maybe they'll tire before they reach us," I whispers, desperation in my tone.

Blood-curdling screams from our fellow villagers penetrate the walls of our home, and I shift closer to Leif.

As he wraps an arm around my shoulders, his grip on his ax tightens, and his knuckles turn white. "Maybe," he says with a forced smile.

I don't know how much time passes, but I spend it praying, begging for God's mercy and offering up whatever I can think of as a bargaining chip.

Someone carrying a torch passes by the window, and the flame glows through the opening. Leif faces me and cups my chin.

"I love you," he says. "I've loved you since the moment I saw you, and I will love you for eternity."

I frantically shake my head. "No, Leif. Stop talking like that. We're not going to die."

"We are," he insists. "Or at least, I am." He presses a kiss to my lips. "Tell me you love me."

"I do, Leif. I love you so much."

I surge up from the water, coming awake with a start. I've had that dream for as long as I can remember, but this is the first time I'm recognizing it for what it is: a memory.

My dreams haven't been dreams at all.

Rising from the tub, I know what I have to do. Without slowing down to drain the water, I grab a towel from the rack and wrap it around my waist. A sense of acceptance settles into my very being, and I'm practically giddy with excitement.

I love Viking. My soul loves him, has always loved him. Whether it be now, or in ten more lifetimes, we will be together.

Why wait?

He represents everything I've been passionate about my entire life. And when Kára said that my soul and Mea's are one and the same, it was as if so many pieces of a puzzle clicked into place. I suddenly understood why I'd instantly felt a connection to Viking. I was able to wrap my mind around the fact that I love a man I barely know.

Because my soul knows his.

I grip the doorknob and twist, but the door flies open much faster than I'm expecting, and I'm knocked onto my ass.

"You stupid fucking bitch!"

Staring up at the intruder, I'm shocked to see Jeff scowling down at me.

"Jeff? What are you doing?"

"I tried to warn you," he grates out as he leans over and grabs me by the hair. "I begged you to change your thesis topic, but you wouldn't listen."

Jeff drags me back to the tub and slams my head against the edge. My vision blurs, and I try to hang onto consciousness, but fail, and the world goes black.



Viking

I SIT on my Harley in front of Makayla's house like a creeper. She didn't respond to my last text asking her to promise to call me if anything happened, and I panicked. Kára tried to stop me, but I refused to listen.

The street is quiet, and the sun is starting to set, casting shadows across the road, but my view is suddenly blocked when Kára appears in front of my bike.

"You need to get inside now," she cries.

"What are you thinking? Someo—"

"You can bitch at me later," she snaps. "Makayla needs you."

I throw my leg over my bike and take off toward her front door at a run. Not bothering to slow down, I kick the door in.

"Makayla!" I shout.

Thuds come from down the hall, and I race in that direction. The bathroom door is open, and I see a shadow on the tile floor. It takes me less than a second to enter the room, and when I do, it takes all of my willpower not to vomit.

Makayla is face down in the full tub, and blood swirls in the water.

"I was wondering if you were going to show up."

I whirl toward the voice and am torn between saving Makayla and murdering Jeff.

You can do both.

Focusing on my inner thoughts, I launch myself at Jeff while simultaneously and silently commanding the water to part so Makayla doesn't drown.

If she hasn't already.

Cold water sloshes over the edge of the tub and floods the bathroom floor. Jeff stares at the mess, his jaw dropped in disbelief.

“What the... How did you do that?” he stammers.

“If she’s dead, I swear on all that’s holy, I’ll gut you,” I snarl.

“She should’ve listened to me. If she just would have listened to me.”

“What are you talking about?” I bark.

“I couldn’t let her study Valhalla anymore. I need that position at the museum, not her.”

I remember reading in the folder from Ms. Steinbeck that there was a museum position on the line after Makayla graduates, but I never gave it a second thought, figuring I’d be long gone by then.

“All of this over a fucking job?”

“It’s not just a job! It’s the only way to make it in this field of study. Without Ireland, I’d be ruined.”

“I knew there was something about you I didn’t like as soon as I met you.”

“You think I give a damn?” he counters. “Not only is Makayla already dead, but I’ve seen what you can do. I’ll expose you for the freak of nature you are.”

I laugh bitterly. “Hate to break it to you, Jeff, but you’re not walking out of here alive.”

His eyes widen as he stares past me. I glance over my shoulder and see Makayla standing there with my ax in her hand. I arch a brow in question, and she shrugs.

“It just appeared,” she says as if that’s something she’s used to.

“What are ya gonna do with that?” Jeff asks, fear in his tone.

“Follow through on Viking’s threat,” she says.

I have just enough time to step to the side as she throws the weapon at him, and the blade lodges in his chest. Jeff slumps to the floor in a pool of blood, and several seconds pass when a man shimmers into the room, startling us both.

“I mean you no harm,” he says.

“You shimmered,” I say.

“I’m a Reaper. It’s what we do.” He glances down at the dead man and sighs. “That’s gonna leave a mark.” When he lifts his gaze back to mine, he smiles. “He was a Legacy, you know?”

“I didn’t know.”

“But you got a feeling when you met him, did you not?”

“I did, but I just figured he was putting off bad vibes.”

“Well, you’re safe since it wasn’t you who took his life.” He shifts his stare to Makayla, who’s inching closer to me. “And you, Makayla Elizabeth Ashbridge, will make one Fire Pit of a Valkyrie.”

He bends down and places his hand on Jeff’s chest, and both of them shimmer into the ether, leaving my ax to clatter to the tile.

I turn and face Makayla. “Are you okay?”

She touches a hand to her head. “Just a bump. Nothing I can’t handle.”

“I thought you were dead,” I say on a sigh.

“Don’t you want me dead?”

“I... Well... Yeah, I suppose I do. But not like that.”

“Viking, you should know something.”

“Don’t say it,” I snap. “Please don’t say you won’t go with me.”

“That’s know what I was going to say.”

“Oh?”

She shakes her head. “No. I was going to tell you that I love you. I was going to say that I’d be honored to transition to Valhalla and be by your side.”

“You said you needed time,” I remind her.

“And apparently, I didn’t need as much as I thought. We’re soulmates, what can I say?”

“Kára was right,” I observe.

“About?”

“She’s been telling me from the moment I was transitioned to Valhalla that I would have my wife again, and here you are.”

“Here I am.”

I lean forward, cupping her cheeks, and softly kiss the woman I’m destined to be with.

“I’ve loved you since the moment I saw you, and I will love you for eternity,” I say when I pull away.

“And I love you, Leif. More than life, and death, itself.”

EPILOGUE

VIKING

One month later...

“I ’m having trouble reconciling the Odin I know with the one standing before me.”

Odin grin at me. I’ve been hesitant to come and see him since Makayla and I, and the VRMC brothers, transitioned to Valhalla. It didn’t help that I had to watch the love of my very long life and death die to get here, but I recognize that it couldn’t be helped.

“You once told me that a man’s word is all he has,” he reminds me. “Do you still believe that?”

“I do.”

“I know you think that I didn’t keep my word, that I was maliciously letting you down. But that wasn’t the case.”

“Then why wait so long to let me find her?”

“Viking, despite popular belief, I don’t have control over everything,” Odin admits. “Destiny doesn’t give a damn what the gods want.”

“You never had any say in how all of this played out?” I ask.

“Some, sure.” He shrugs. “But just like you, I have a higher power that I answer to.”

“Then why let us believe otherwise?”

“Would you be as loyal, as dedicated, if you’d have known?” he counters.

“Probably more so.”

“Noted. I’ll take that into consideration moving forward.”

“I appreciate that.” I extend my hand to shake his. “Is there anything else before I return to my quarters to get ready for the festivities?”

“Only one more thing.”

“What’s that?”

“You and Makayla have my blessing. From here until eternity, I wish you both nothing but happiness and joy.”



Makayla

“YOU LOOK ABSOLUTELY STUNNING.”

I grin at Kára as I stare at my reflection in the full-length mirror. It’s been a difficult transition from living to dead, but I haven’t regretted my decision once.

I miss my dad for sure, but Odin assured me that I could return to the human world often to visit. And my dad thinks I’m off in Ireland working at the museum, so he’s none the wiser about what’s actually going on.

“Are you ready for tonight?” she asks, breaking into my thoughts.

“I was born for this, remember?” I tease.

Viking and I are getting married. It’s odd because Kára was permitted to show us what our life was like as Leif and Mea, so we’ve both seen our wedding, but that won’t hold a candle to actually experiencing it.

“You were.”

“I do have a question before we head to the courtyard,” I tell her.

“Ask me anything.”

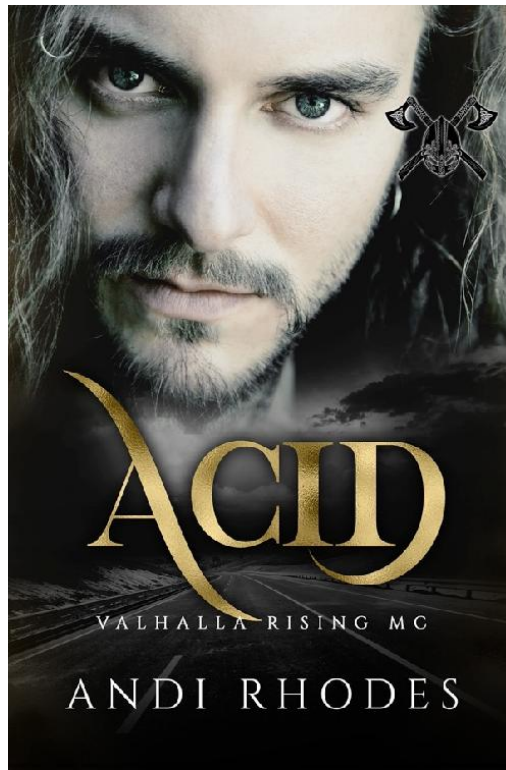
I settle my hand over my slightly swollen stomach. “How is this possible?”

It turns out, I conceived the just before transitioning to Valhalla. We’re both ecstatic, even if a little confused. We were both led to believe it couldn’t happen while I was still human.

“With love, anything is possible.”

UP NEXT IN VALHALLA RISING
MC:

ACID: BOOK #2



Humans are taught that death is the end, that it's their soul's final curtain call. But for the members of Valhalla Rising MC, death is only the beginning.

Acid...

My life was mediocre at best, but then I died and was escorted to Valhalla. I never thought of myself as a warrior, but rather a man who would do anything necessary to protect others. Which is exactly why Odin sends me back to the land of the living.

The woman I'm tasked with saving wants nothing to do with me, but my orders are to protect her at all costs. When strange things start happening on her farm, she relents and accepts my help, and I'm only too happy to provide it.

I know I can keep her safe, but I'm not at all sure about myself.

Peyton...

Some women spend their time searching for the perfect man, while others waste it on men who break them. I pride myself on not falling into either category. Men complicate things, leaving only pain and devastation in their wake. Which is why I prefer the company of my dogs.

Growing up in the foster care system, I never had any choice but to be independent. But when the life I've built is threatened, and I'm pushed beyond the limits of what I can handle alone, I'm forced to rely on the help of a handsome stranger.

Is he the answer to all my silent prayers, or will he destroy my heart even as he saves my life?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andi Rhodes is an author whose passion is creating romance from chaos in all her books! She writes MC (motorcycle club) romance with a generous helping of suspense and doesn't shy away from the more difficult topics. Her books can be triggering for some so consider yourself warned. Andi also ensures each book ends with the couple getting their HEA! Most importantly, Andi is living her real life HEA with her husband and their boxers.

For access to release info, updates, and exclusive content, be sure to sign up for Andi's newsletter at andirhodes.com.