

CHAPTER 1

THE SHADOW DARKER THAN NIGHT

Most people spend their lives collecting secrets.

Me? I was *born* into my secrets. Well, one *huge* secret really. And the one person I'd ever been able to fully share it with—the only person who really got it—was gone.

“Eeeeyaaah!”

I swung my battle-ax into Ivar's neck. Torso. Knees. Each blow reverberated all the way up my arms and rattled my teeth, but I didn't stop. Couldn't stop. Not if I was ever going to live up to the legacy she'd left behind. And the promise I'd made.

“WHOA! WHOA! WHOA!”

I spun around. Dad stood at the bottom of the basement steps, one eyebrow raised as his gaze shifted from the training dummy to the ax in my hand. “It's a good thing that's made of wood, or Ivar the Boneless here would be *headless* too.” He smiled.

It took a few seconds for his words to register as I stood there with my chest heaving. Then I scowled at the weapon clenched in my fist. “I've been practicing for years with this thing. When do

I get to use the real stuff? I think I'm ready." With a final look of derision, I tossed the ax to the floor, where it landed with a clatter.

My dad stepped toward the wall and adjusted a gleaming Viking broadsword that hung among a collection of axes, knives, and other wicked-looking battle gear. Not exactly what you'd expect to find in the basement of most suburban homes. But then, we weren't a normal family. Not by a long shot.

"Abby, we've talked about this before. Warrior training starts at fourteen. Not my rule. That comes directly from the Grey Council." He slid his arm around the dummy's shoulders. "What do you think, Ivar?" Then, dropping his voice an octave, he pretended to speak for the dummy. "I vote we wait till she's thirty."

"Daaaaddddd . . ." I turned away to hide the slight upturn at the corner of my mouth. I wasn't ready to be out of my funk yet.

"Oh, there it is. Daaaadddd. Exactly the way every father dreams of being greeted by his adoring daughter." He stopped and waited, maybe expecting a reply.

My bangs were plastered against my forehead and poked into my eyes. I grabbed a towel off a nearby hook and swept it across my face with an angry grunt.

"Anyway," he said. "I didn't come down here to annoy you. Really. Just wanted to let you know I'm going to run down to the store and pick up a couple things. I could get you something. Maybe some cookie dough ice cream? The kind you like with the fudge in the middle?"

I only sighed in response as I knelt and started gathering up

the training manuals that lay strewn on the floor in a semicircle around me.

Dad squatted in front of me, trying to catch my eyes. “Look, I get it. This day is hard for me too. Really hard. Your mom . . .” He sucked in a sharp breath and let it out slowly before continuing. “I just wish she was here to help you with this stuff. All of it. Because I’m clearly clueless.”

The mention of Mom finally pierced through my anger, and I could almost feel it fall away like a discarded cloak. “Me too,” I said quietly. “But not because you’re clueless. Well, you are. Sometimes. Not about everything. But . . .”

He held up his hands and laughed. “Okay, okay, I get it. No need to kick a guy when he’s down.”

I slid one foot across and nudged him with my toe.

“Hey,” he said as he stood, “we’re still doing our usual thing in her memory tonight, right? A batch of my famous banana chocolate chip pancakes. Then watch *The Princess Bride* for, what is it, the three hundred ninety-fifth time?”

I smiled and nodded. “Twenty-third. And, you know, if you just happened to find some of that ice cream you mentioned, that wouldn’t be a bad thing.”

“The one thing my daughter learns from me is drowning her problems in copious amounts of sugar.” He laughed and glanced down at his watch. “Okay, ice cream it is. I’d better get going, then. Shouldn’t be more than twenty . . . twenty-five minutes. You okay here by yourself?”

“Dad, I’m twelve, not two. I’ll be fine.”

“I know. Miss Independent. Roger that.” He started up the stairs, then poked his head back into view. “Abby?”

I turned and looked up at him. “Yeah?”

“Love you.”

“Love you too, Dad.”

I listened as he walked the rest of the way up the stairs, including the one that squeaked every time. He kept trying to fix it but said it remained hopelessly incorrigible. His footsteps echoed down the hall, then the front door opened and closed.

I shut my eyes and focused on my breathing. In through the nose. Out through the mouth. Push out with the senses. The feel of the rough coolness of the basement floor on the bare skin of my feet. The rich scents of wood and leather that filled the room. Even the familiar *rattle-hum* of our air conditioner doing battle with the unseasonably warm North Carolina October afternoon.

It had been four years since my mom died, but it still felt like yesterday. When I opened my eyes, my gaze fell on the scarred oak surface of a workbench in the corner of the basement. Crossing toward it, I slid my training manuals into the gap on a small shelf above the tools, right beside a thick leather-bound volume where she’d meticulously recorded her life’s work.

My hand automatically strayed under the desk’s surface, probing among the thick knots for a tiny latch.

Click.

A hidden drawer popped open in the lower left of the workbench.

Mom and I had always used it to send secret messages to each other.

I extracted the last thing I ever gave her—a yellowed piece of notebook paper—from the drawer and unfolded it, pressing its corners flat on the desk’s surface. On it a crayon drawing showed stick figures of Mom and me battling a giant green monster with sharp, pointy teeth. “My little Grendel hunter” was written in one corner in Mom’s neat handwriting.

I traced the letters with the tip of my finger. “I’ll finish what you started, Mom.” My whispered words felt small, quickly swallowed up in the settling gloom. Was it because I wasn’t sure I could keep that promise? I was already sort of past the expiration date when most Aesir kids start to show signs of special abilities. And with each passing year, it became less likely . . .

THUMP.

My pulse leapt. I twisted my head to stare up at the ceiling. What was that? Probably just the wind banging a tree branch . . .

SMASH!

The sound of glass shattering.

Okay, there’s no way that was the wind. My eyes flicked toward my wooden ax on the floor, then to the weapons hanging on the wall. Sure, I wasn’t supposed to use them. But if there was someone upstairs, I was totally not going up there with a toy ax. Dad would understand.

I crossed to the wall and selected a short one-handed sword. Better for fighting in close quarters. Then I turned toward the stairs. At the bottom step, I paused and listened.

Nothing. Silence.

At the top of the stairs, the door stood open like Dad had left it. But at my angle, I couldn't see anything except the light fixture over our kitchen table. It was off, the shadows of late afternoon stretching toward it across the ceiling. My hand was trembling so badly, I thought I might drop the sword. Some warrior I was.

I could always call the police, right? With a groan, I pictured my cell phone charging on the kitchen counter. A lot of good that did me down here. But then, I could always wait for Dad to come home. He'd said he wouldn't be gone very long.

No. I needed to show him I wasn't just some little girl anymore. I could take care of myself. And maybe he'd already come back and was in trouble.

I forced myself up one step, then another, placing my foot carefully each time, starting with the balls of my feet and then silently rolling my heel downward like Mom had trained me. About midway up, I remembered the squeaky step. Which one was it again? The fourth from the top. I think. Or was it the fifth? Ugh. I couldn't remember. Could I somehow vault over both of them? Likely I'd end up falling down the stairs and making an even bigger racket. Okay: eeny, meeny, miny . . .

CRREEEEAAAAK!

Argh! Well, there went my element of surprise. I quickly covered the remaining stairs to the top and pressed my body flat against the wall next to the doorframe. It had been, what, two or three minutes since I'd heard a sound up here? I replayed the noises in my mind. Maybe Dad had forgotten something and come back.

Yeah, that was probably it. Our little suburb of Charlotte wasn't exactly an epicenter of criminal activity. I was probably making a big deal out of nothing.

Still . . .

"Dad?" I called. Nothing. "Dad?" A little louder. No response. Okay, so he probably got whatever he needed and left again. I was just being a big baby who couldn't be at home by herself for twenty minutes. I lowered my sword and stepped out into the kitchen. My overactive imagination . . .

That's when I saw the shattered glass on the floor. The curtain lining the French doors to our back patio stirred gently in the breeze. The door itself stood open, one of its panes smashed out.

I instantly jerked my sword up again, nearly slicing off my own ear. Maybe Dad had a point about waiting to use real weapons. The blade wobbled even worse than before. I was probably more dangerous to myself than to any intruder.

The only sound other than the thudding of my heart in my ears was the ticking of the clock on the living room mantel. I swiveled my head side to side, quickly surveying the room. The dying sun left me in a gray twilight where every shadow and object seemed to loom with sinister intent. In the corner of the dining room, I could just make out Dad's desk. Every drawer stood open, papers, pens, and file folders strewn across the floor. Fortunately, whoever had done it appeared to be long gone. I hoped.

Bzzzzzzzzzz.

I about jumped out of my skin. What was that noise? I swept the rooms with my eyes. It seemed to be coming from the kitchen.

I took a tentative step in that direction, then another. At any minute, I half expected a figure to fly out of the shadows. In a few more steps, I stood in the entryway to the kitchen. I tilted my head to the side and listened, trying to pinpoint the source of the noise.

BZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ.

Then I saw it. A small object in the middle of the kitchen floor, obscured by shadows thrown from the dim light of the range hood. Everything about this screamed, *Wrong. Get out now.* But I stepped into the kitchen anyway and in two quick strides reached the source of the noise. I crouched down to get a better look at it. What?

There in the middle of our kitchen floor, an old windup toy Viking ship lay vibrating. I recognized it as one my mom had given me when I was probably four or five. But I hadn't seen it in forever. When I picked it up, the tiny oars on the sides of the ship whirred into motion, no longer obstructed by the floor. I pinched the windup mechanism and spun it forward. The oars spun wildly for a few seconds and then stopped. Where had this come from?

A faint glow caught the edge of my vision, and I turned toward it. In the center of the dark glass of the oven door burned a strange red glow. Was the oven on? It took me a few seconds to realize I was looking at a reflection. My head jerked downward to my chest. The runestone my mom had given me years ago seemed to smolder with an angry red light where it hung on a leather cord. I snatched the stone in my hand and pulled it closer to my face. The Norse rune Algiz—protection, life—in the shape of a trident shone in crimson against the coal-black surface. But it was upside down. What did that mean?

I could guess: danger. Death.

As I squatted there inspecting the stone, a tiny tickle at the base of my skull warned of a presence behind me. I whirled, dropping the toy ship and bringing my sword up in the same motion. My heart hammered as my eyes searched the darkness. There. Framed by the entrance to the hallway. A shapeless form even blacker than the night around it. Was that . . . ? My sword bounced uselessly in my trembling hand as the stench of decay seemed to flow around me like a grasping claw.

“Hello, Abby,” came an ancient, raspy voice.

I screamed.