Chapter 17

Lack of Subtlety Must Be a Family Trait

By the time I woke up, Grant’s side of the bed was cold. He was used to waking up early on the farm, though he’d been taking advantage of the last few days to sleep in a little. I’d managed to sleep in until ten, which meant I had to sit at the table with my face in my arms grumbling until my dad finished making me a new pot of coffee. I didn’t look up until he put a mug down in front of me along with a chocolate donut with sprinkles from Dunkin’, which also happened to be my favorite.

“Thanks, Dad.” I straightened up, taking a long sip of my coffee before I took a bite out of the donut.

“You’re welcome,” my dad slid into the seat across from me with his own cup of coffee. He grinned, causing a crinkle of crow’s feet next to his eyes. My dad smiled a lot and it showed. “You want to discuss the hickey?”

“I most certainly do not,” I said, using my donut hand to jab at the air in front of my dad. “You want to talk about why you’re not at work?”

My dad grinned into his coffee. “I took a week off when I found out you were coming.”

“We didn’t give you much notice. Were they pissed?”

“I think they were relieved I was finally using some of it,” he said, the smile gone.

This got my attention. “You haven’t been taking days off?”

He shrugged one shoulder, not looking up from his coffee. “Why would I? You’re not around. Your mom comes and goes. My friends have either moved, are too busy, or dead.”

I frowned. “Who died?”

“Josh. Aneurysm. Keeled over in his fishing boat.”

“Wow, I’m sorry, Dad. That’s awful. I had no idea.”

“I didn’t see the point in burdening you with it when you called.”

I had the sudden realization that I hadn’t been talking to my dad enough. When was the last time I’d called him? I’d been very caught up in my life, but was that an excuse? It didn’t take long to call every once in awhile. I’m not used to feeling disappointed in myself, but I undoubtedly was this morning. I generally consider myself to be confident, though I know I occasionally overstep into outright arrogance. I’m the daughter of a Valkyrie. It’s difficult *not* to be arrogant. We drank our coffee in silence for a few minutes, both of us lost in thought.

“Does all of this have something to do with why you’re selling the house?”

“Yeah, I guess.” He sighed. “It’s too big of a house for just me, and I’m starting to wonder why I’m still here. I’ve always lived in Rhode Island. I love it, but maybe it’s time for a change?”

I wouldn’t have been more surprised than if my dad announced he hated watching baseball and was now joining a vegan commune. Not that any of that was bad, just not his style. “But you love it here.”

“Yeah, but what do I have to compare it to? The house is almost paid off. If I sell, I could travel or start over somewhere else.” He rested his face in his hand. “I haven’t decided yet. I’m still figuring things out.”

“I understand,” I said. “I think.”

He sipped his coffee, a mischievous twinkle in his eye. “Now do you want to talk about the hickey?”

“What hickey?” My mom asked, walking in. She’d clearly just come back from a battle somewhere. She was still wearing fatigues and smelled of sweat and blood. “Hi, dear.” She kissed my dad on the cheek.

“Ugh.” I flopped back in my chair. “I said I didn’t want to talk about it.” I held up a hand before she could start in on her speech again. “Yes, I’m well aware it’s natural and healthy, etc.”

Edda walked in, Tally and Grant at her heels. Great, a full audience. They all took a seat, except Grant who leaned against the wall, a mug of coffee in his hand. I had no idea where Garm was.

“What’s healthy and natural?” Grant asked.

I pushed my plate out of the way so I could bury my face in the table again. “Oh for fuck’s sake.”

“Nice hickey.” I could hear the grin in Edda’s voice. “Grant, I have to say, you don’t seem the type.”

“I’m not,” Grant said. “That’s not my handiwork.” The room quieted. It was a good thing I was unarmed, because I had the sudden urge to stab something.

“Interesting.” Edda drew out the word.

I clearly wasn’t getting out of this, so I sat up. “Fine. Loki visited me again. Apparently he thought this would be funny.”

“He wasn’t wrong,” Tally said. I glared at her. “What? I think it’s very funny.”

I jabbed a finger in her direction. “You’re back on my shit list.”

“Do you want me to talk to him?” My mom has slipped her arms around my dad, her chin resting on his head.

“No,” I said emphatically. “Telling Loki no is like lighting a ten-foot-tall neon sign that says, ‘please do that thing.’”

Mom grimaced because she knew I was right. “Still, the offer stays open.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“Was that the only reason he visited?” Edda asked.

“No,” I said. “He wanted to remind me that I’d forgotten one of his gifts, and to tell me how much he hated papasan chairs.” I finished my donut. “By the way, I have a giant beanbag chair now.”

My dad paused with his mug halfway to his mouth. “Okay?”

I scooted my chair back and stood, grabbing my mug. “So now I’m going to grab another cup of coffee and go through my stuff from the other night.”

Edda handed me my plate. “Clean up after yourself. I had to put our training gear away yesterday.”

“Thanks,” I said, grabbing the plate. “I’ll do it next time.”

Edda made a noise that said she didn’t believe me at all.

Coffee refilled, I trudged my way up the stairs. What came back with me from my dream the other night? Boots, dress, and clutch. Sadly the cape hadn’t come through. Not that I had a lot of opportunities to wear a cape outside of battle, which was a shame. Capes needed to come back in a big way. I set my coffee on my dresser and stood in front of my closet. I hadn’t bothered to close the doors when I put the dress away. My new gown was hung up between an old winter coat and a dress I’d worn to some formal dance or another. Dances were never my favorite thing. I didn’t mind going dancing as an adult, but teen dances were a big ball of awkward.

I checked the gown quickly, just in case I’d missed something and it was more than it seemed. Since it didn’t have pockets, that didn’t take long. The material wasn’t anything otherworldly. The stitching looked like regular stitches, and there weren’t any hidden runes or anything that I could find. The boots turned up nothing as well.

I grabbed the clutch, sitting cross-legged on the bed with it. There was a knock on the door frame and I looked up to see Grant. “Want company?”

I patted the space on the bed next to me. The bed was a little lumpy because I hadn’t really made it this morning, so much as yanked the comforter up in a half-assed manner. Grant joined me, turning on the bed so he could face me.

“Fair warning. I haven’t brushed my teeth yet, but I have had coffee, so you might not want to lean too close.” I opened up the clutch and turned it over, watching as a few things fell out onto the comforter. I peeked into it and ran my hand along the silk lining to make sure everything was out before setting it aside. Only a few things were on the comforter—a pack of gum, a small jar of liquid concealer, and three packs of condoms.

“I have concerns,” Grant said, staring at the pile.

“Right? If you put hair spray and a brush in there, you’d have the purse of every girl I knew in high school. All useful things in their own way, but I’m not sure why my uncle was so adamant that I checked the purse.” I grabbed the pack of gum, examining it. Nothing fancy, just cinnamon gum. Maybe the gum was a general criticism of my breath? Not my fault he kissed me. I told him no and he deserved what he got, as far as I was concerned. I unwrapped it and put a piece in my mouth. “Do teens still use hair spray? Is it gel or some new thing now?”

“How should I know?” Grant lifted up the concealer. “This even matches your skin tone.”

I frowned. Condoms aside, I’d needed the gum, and I’d kind of wanted the concealer earlier. In high school you showed off hickeys. Not so much as an adult. I looked into the purse. Still empty. I closed it and handed it to Grant.

“It doesn’t really go with my outfit,” Grant said.

“Just hold it,” I said. I counted to ten in my head. “Okay, now empty it out.”

Grant didn’t ask questions, but unsnapped the clutch, holding it open as he shook it out over the bed. A handful of objects fell out—super glue, a coil of copper wire, a tiny book, and more condoms. Grant picked up the book. “It’s the pocket book version of the Kama Sutra.”

Subtle, my uncle was not. “What about the glue and the wire?”

“I was actually planning on going to the store in a bit. Your dad’s out of glue and I needed some as well as wire for my arrows.”

I snatched the clutch back, concentrating on my need for a disguise for tomorrow. This time when I opened the clutch, three things joined our growing pile on the bed. The first was a plastic pair of glasses with a fake nose and mustache attached. Then a necklace and—surprise—more condoms. I grabbed the condoms and shook them at the ceiling. “We get it. Cut it out or I’m taking a vow of celibacy!”

Grant picked up the glasses and put them on, looking around. “Anything?”

I shook my head. “You still look like you, only the gag version.” I held up the necklace. The chain was silver, the pendant looked old and tarnished, but was definitely two snakes twining together. Bingo. I put it over my head, the chain long enough that I didn’t have to unclasp it. I tucked it into my tank top, the metal cool against my skin.

Grant blinked. “Huh.”

I scrambled up and stood in front of my mirror. Instead of the usual me, I was met with an entirely different reflection. My blond hair was now bubble gum pink. My skin was a dark gold and my eyes a brown so deep they were almost black. I was also two inches taller, with an athletic figure and more prominent cheekbones. A tattoo of a bright red snake twisted down one arm, while a thin scar cut from the inside corner of one eye down to under my chin. “I look pretty bad ass.”

Grant frowned. “That is so weird. I know it’s you. She moves like you. But you look nothing like yourself and you don’t sound right.” Grant climbed off the bed and came up behind me, leaning in close to my neck. “You even smell different.” He shuddered. “I don’t like it. Please take it off.”

“In a second. First, take a picture.”

Grant took out his phone and took a photo, showing it to me when he was done. Not all glamours can stand up to photos or video. So I had Grant take a video next. The disguise held. “This is amazing. I’ll be able to waltz right into the competition.”

Grant jammed his phone back into his pocket, an uneasy look on his face. “Please change back.”

I slipped the necklace back over my head, going back to my normal self. My uncle had actually come through. “You’re going to have to get used to it. I’ll have to wear it when we go to the fights.”

“I know,” Grant said. “I don’t think you understand how disturbing it was to watch, though.”

Everyone was equal parts thrilled at the disguise and disturbed by it like Grant was. Even Garm looked surprised for a second, coming up to sniff me before his lip curled back and he let out a growl. He didn’t care for the change in my scent either, apparently.

“It’s still me, Garm.” I slipped the necklace off, holding it above my head. Garm still looked offended. I slipped the necklace into my pocket.

Tally and Edda were both sitting on the couch examining the purse. The look on my mother’s face was almost funny. “I can’t believe he gave you such a thing. That is quite a gift, daughter.” She shook her head. “He has favored you, and one cannot say no to a god or goddesses favors. You must be careful. I do not know what game he is playing at, but remember that Loki is always playing a game. Be careful that you do not become a sacrificial pawn.”

“Is it that bad?” My dad gently tugged at her hand until she sat on his knee and wrapped her arms around his neck. “You really need a shower,” he whispered, making Solveig laugh.

I snorted. “Dad, she’s understating it, probably. Loki doesn’t just have irons in the fire—he has his own foundry. Or smelting plant or whatever you call it.” When my dad turned concerned eyes on me, I promised him I’d be careful. “It may seem like I throw myself pell-mell into danger, but I promise I do think first.” Everyone in the room turned to look at me. “What? I do. I’m not totally reckless.” They continued to stare. “You’re all assholes.” I crossed my arms and decided to change the subject. “Edda, how goes the search?”

She set the purse down on the couch. “I’ve traced the company down to something called Black Swan Holdings. Not that I have any idea what Black Swan Holdings is or who owns it. There isn’t so much as a crumb to be found.” She flopped back into the couch, irritated. Edda did not like being thwarted. “What I can tell you is that their corporate logo is a single black feather, just like the invitation.”

“So they’re involved somehow,” I said. “We just don’t know who they are. Still.”

“I guess you’ll know more tomorrow,” Tally said. “If they’re putting it on and it’s such a big deal, they’re bound to have a representative there.”

I wasn’t good at waiting, but I knew tomorrow would be here before we knew it. All we could do was prepare.