

ONE

MATT

“CONFRONTATION”

Matt walked through the center of Blackwell, gym bag in hand, jacket thrown over his shoulder. It was dark now, with an icy wind from the north, but the cold felt good blowing back his sweat-soaked hair. After two hours of boxing practice, he'd been tempted to take a detour and jump in the Norrström River, even if he had noticed ice on it that morning. Ice in September. Weird. Even in South Dakota, winter never came *this* early.

A muscle spasmed in his leg, and he winced as he stopped to rub it. The upcoming tournament might be for charity—raising money to help tsunami victims in Hawaii—but Coach

Forde still made Matt work as hard as he would before a title match.

Matt started walking again, limping slightly. As much as he wished he could call for a ride, he knew better. He'd made that mistake last winter, when Coach had said a blizzard was coming. He'd gotten his ride—and a lecture on how his brothers had never needed one, even when it *was* storming. He couldn't catch a lift with his friends, either—that was worse because it set a bad example. If Sheriff Thorsen's boys weren't safe walking through Blackwell at night, who was?

Matt was reaching down to rub his leg again when something moved in the town square. His head shot up, eyes narrowing. Outside the rec center, two kids climbed onto the weathered Viking longship. Shields lined both sides as if invisible warriors rowed the old wooden boat, protection always within reach. A carved dragon arched from the hull.

The kids were probably setting up a prank, trying to beat the one Matt had done with his friend Cody at Sigrblot, the spring festival. The parade had arrived at the longship to find it covered in a tarp...and making honking noises. Underneath it, they'd discovered a flock of geese wearing little Viking helmets.

Best prank ever, that's what everyone said. Unfortunately, Matt had to pretend he didn't have anything to do with it. If his parents had found out...well, they wouldn't ground him or anything. He'd just get "the talk." How disappointed

they were. How embarrassed they were. How much more responsible his brothers were. Personally, he'd rather be grounded.

In a few more steps, he saw that one of the kids was a guy with shaggy brown hair that needed cutting and clothes that needed washing. With him was a girl. Her clothes weren't in such rough shape, but her blond hair needed a trim just as badly.

Fen and Laurie Brekke. Great. The cousins were always getting into trouble. Still, Matt told himself they really might just be pulling a prank... until he saw Fen wrench at one of the shields.

There were a lot of things Fen could do and Matt would just look away, tell himself it was none of his business. That wasn't always easy. Being the sheriff's kid meant he'd had lectures about vandalism since he was old enough to carve his name into a park bench. But this wasn't a park bench. It was an actual longship—something the people in Blackwell were really proud of. And there was Fen, yanking on it and kicking at it.

As Matt's temper flared, his amulet flared with it. He reached for the silver pendant. It was in the shape of an upside-down hammer and almost as old as the longship. Thor's Hammer. Everyone in Matt's family had one. Thorsen wasn't just their name. They really *were* descendants of the Norse god.

As Matt looked at Fen and Laurie again, his amulet

burned hotter. He was about to yell at them, then he stopped and took deep breaths, sucking in cold air.

He could hear his mother's voice. *You need to learn to control it, Matty. I don't know why you have so much trouble with that. No other Thorsen has this problem. Your brothers could handle theirs even when they were younger than you.*

Controlling his temper—and Thor's Hammer—seemed especially hard around the Brekkes. It was like the Hammer knew they were related to the trickster god Loki. The cousins didn't know that, but Matt did, and he could feel it when he looked at them.

Matt took another deep breath. Yes, he needed to stop Fen and Laurie, but he had to be cool about it. Maybe he could just walk past, pretend he didn't notice them, and they'd see *him* and take off before they were caught.

Fen spotted him. Matt continued walking, giving them a chance to sneak off. Being fair. His dad would be proud—

Fen turned back to the longship and yanked on the shield again.

"Hey!" Matt called.

He didn't say it too loud, and he tried not to sound too angry. Just letting them know he saw them, giving them time to run . . .

"Yeah?" Fen turned and stared straight at him, chin up, shoulders back. He was shorter than Matt. Skinnier, too. The only "big" thing about Fen was his attitude, which was

always getting him into fights with larger guys . . . not that he seemed to mind.

Laurie stepped beside her cousin. Matt couldn't see her expression, but he was sure it matched Fen's. They weren't going to walk away. He'd been stupid to think they would.

"You shouldn't be doing that." Even as Matt said the words, he wanted to smack himself. It was exactly the kind of thing everyone expected the sheriff's kid to say. By tomorrow, everyone at school would have heard Fen and Laurie repeat it with a twist of their lips and a roll of their eyes.

Matt cleared his throat. "It's an artifact, and it's really important to the town." Yeah, like *that* sounded better.

"Really important to *your* town," Fen said. "Thorsen-town."

"Just . . . don't do it, okay?"

"But I want to. And if you want to stop me . . ." Fen stepped forward, giving a grin that was all teeth, and for a second, Matt thought he saw—

Matt shook it off. "Look, I'm just asking—"

"The answer's no." Fen jumped out of the ship with a leap that would make an Olympic athlete proud. "So what are you gonna do about that, Thorsen?"

Matt's amulet heated again. He took a deep breath. *Cool it. Just cool it.*

He remembered something Coach Forde had said dur-

ing practice. He'd been trying to teach Matt how to intimidate an opponent. *You're a big guy*, he'd said. *Use that.*

It was hard for Matt to remember how big he was. At home, he only came up to his brothers' shoulders. But he *was* the tallest kid in eighth grade.

"What am I going to do?" Matt squared his shoulders, flexed, and stepped forward. "Stop you."

Something flashed in Fen's eyes, something cold and hard that made Matt hesitate, but only for a second. He finished his step, stopped in front of Fen, and pulled himself up to his full height.

Laurie climbed out of the ship and moved up beside her cousin. She leaned in and whispered something. Egging him on, Matt was sure.

Fen waved her off. When she hesitated, he said something so low it was almost a growl. Laurie looked at Matt, then backed into the shadows of the longship.

Fen moved forward. "You think you can fight, just because you've won a few in the ring? That's not *real* fighting. I bet you've never thrown a punch without gloves on."

"Then your memory sucks, because I'm pretty sure I beat the snot out of you and Hunter when you two ganged up on Cody."

Fen gave a short bark of a laugh. "That was what? First grade? I've learned a few things since then, Thorsen."

Matt took another step. He was sure Fen would back down. He had to. Taking on Matt was crazy. He hadn't just "won a few in the ring." He'd made it all the way to the state championship.

But Fen just planted his feet far enough apart to keep steady if he got hit. He wanted to fight. Really fight. Matt should have known that. Mom always said this is what got him into trouble—he never thought things through.

If he got into it with Fen, his dad would . . . Matt inhaled sharply. He didn't even want to think what his dad would do.

The power of respect. The power of authority. That's what let Thorsens walk through Blackwell at night. *Not* the power of violence. If he fought Fen Brekke, his dad would haul him in front of the council and let them handle it. The humiliation would be worse than any punishment they'd order.

"You really want to do this?" Matt asked.

Fen cracked his neck, tilting it side to side, and said, "Yeah, I do."

"Well, too bad. I've got a big match coming, and I need to save my strength for a real opponent."

Matt started to turn. As he did, he heard a growl like a dog's, and he saw Fen lunge, eyes glinting yellow, teeth bared. Matt wheeled. The heat of the amulet flared in a wave of fury that turned his world red.

He felt the power surge down his arm. Heard the crackle. Saw his hand light up and tried to pull the power back.

Too late.

The white-hot ball shot from his hand and exploded with a boom and a blast of wind that sent Matt tripping backward. Fen flew right off his feet. He hit the longship hard, his head whipping back, striking the side with a thud. Then he crumpled to the ground.

Laurie yelled something, but Matt couldn't hear the words. She raced to her cousin. Matt did the same. Laurie dropped beside Fen, took him by the shoulder, and shook him. Fen groaned, his eyelids fluttering.

"Is he okay?" Matt said, crouching beside her.

She stood up, lifted her bag like she was about to slug him with it. "You knocked him *out*."

"I didn't mean to. I'm sorry. I—"

"I don't know what kind of trick that was. Throwing that light thing to blind him before you hit him? You call that fair?" She scowled. "Exactly what I'd expect from a Thorsen."

"I didn't—"

"Whatever. Just go. Fen's not swiping anything tonight." She looked at him. "Or do you want to call your dad to lock us up?"

"Of course not. I just—" Matt swallowed. "We should get him to the doctor."

“You think he can afford a doctor?”

“I can. I’ll—”

“We don’t need anything from *you*. Just go away,” Laurie snapped.

“But if he’s—”

“Go. Get out of here.”

He pushed to his feet and hesitated, but she was still glaring at him, and Fen was coming to. Matt probably didn’t want to be around when Fen woke up. So he mumbled another apology, backed away, and left them alone.

TWO

LAURIE

“CHANGES”

Laurie helped Fen up from the ground. Her cousin wasn't ever good at accepting help, and being knocked on his butt by Matt Thorsen of all people wasn't helping matters. The two of them had a natural dislike of one another that she didn't always understand, but *this* time, she got it. Matt was a jerk.

“I'm going to kill him,” Fen snapped for the third time in as many minutes. “He thinks he's so special, but he's just a spoiled rich kid.”

“I know.”

“I could take him.” Fen climbed back over the side of the ship.

She didn't tell Fen he was wrong. She wasn't going to be disloyal, but they both knew Matt was a better fighter. Matt was like a Rottweiler to Fen's back-alley mutt: the mutt might try its best, but the bigger, stronger dog was the one likely to win.

All she said was, "We need to get out of here before he tells his dad and we get arrested."

He ignored her and continued ranting, "We'll see who's smart when I find him alone after school."

"Getting arrested *or* getting detention isn't going to make you seem very smart," she said, as calmly as she could.

"Maybe I won't get caught." Fen stared down at her. He had the bag in one hand, and the other hand rested on the shield he'd been prying loose when they'd gotten to the park.

Laurie dropped her gaze to the weathered ship that stood outside the Thorsen Community and Recreation Center. "What were you thinking? We could've ducked. I know you saw him."

"I'm not afraid of him." Fen stood aboard the ship and stared out at the town.

Laurie shivered. It wasn't hard to think of Fen as a Viking Raider. She wasn't shaking as badly as she'd been when she'd told Matt to shove off, but she still felt all twitchy, like the time she'd grabbed a frayed electrical cord in Uncle Eddy's garage. She stared up at Fen. "His dad is the *sheriff*. He could

send you away . . . or tell the mayor. You know Mayor Thorsen hates our family.”

“I’m not afraid of any Thorsens.” Fen straightened his shoulders and gave her a look that reminded her of Fen’s dad, her uncle Eddy, which wasn’t a good thing. Uncle Eddy never backed down from a challenge. She might not know exactly what he’d done to end up in prison, but she’d bet it had started with a challenge.

He tugged on the shield. “I can’t get it loose.”

“Just leave the shield alone!” She rubbed her hands again.

“Fine.” He hopped over the side of the ship and came to stand beside her.

Laurie didn’t always understand her cousin, but she knew that he had a stubborn streak that led him—and often her—into trouble. That wasn’t what they needed. “Matt’s not worth the hassle.”

With a soft snort, Fen said, “You got that right.”

“So you’ll stay away from him *and* the shield? I don’t want you to get into anything.” She looked at him, hoping for a promise that didn’t come, and when he stayed stone-silent, she gently bumped her head into his shoulder and immediately felt silly.

But then Fen butted her head with his and said, “I’m okay.”

She paused. That’s what she’d meant, some combination of *I’m worried, you fool. Are you okay?* and *Talk to me*. Fen got

it. Her dad's side of the family always seemed better at communicating without words. Her dad did, too—when he was around, at least, which these days wasn't very often.

“Come on,” he said. “You need to get home anyhow.”

They started toward her apartment building. She wouldn't have time to walk Fen home, but even if she did, he wouldn't let her. He was the older brother she didn't have, determined to protect her even as he drove her crazy. Most of the Brekke side of the family treated her like she was something to be shielded. Even though she didn't see them, she knew they watched out for her. No one at school ever gave her grief, and she was pretty sure that Fen had let it be known that he'd pummel anyone who started anything with her.

“I miss seeing everyone,” Laurie said quietly. Aside from Fen, she only really got to see her dad's family when she passed them in town. Fen was in her class, so they saw each other at school, but there were no family barbecues, no parties, no even stopping by for a chat. Her mother stayed clear of the Brekkes, and since her dad was off on one of his never-ending trips, Laurie wasn't able to be around the family, either.

“Everyone misses you, too . . . and Uncle Stig.” Fen didn't mention her half brother, Jordie, or her mom, of course. The Brekkes hadn't quite rejected Jordie, but he wasn't *family* to them. He was proof that her mother and father had separated, that her mother had tried to move on, but that hadn't

worked out. Now, her mom let her dad move back in every time he came to town. *He* treated Jordie like a son, not as much as he did with Fen, but still he accepted Laurie's brother. The rest of the Brekkes weren't that cool.

"Has Uncle Stig called lately?" Fen asked. There was so much hope in his voice that Laurie wished, not for the first time, that her dad would try to remember to call Fen, too. Of course, he didn't remember to call her most of the time, so expecting him to do much else was silly.

"A few weeks ago. He's coming to see me soon. That was what he said, at least." Laurie ducked her head.

Fen nudged her with his shoulder. "He'll come."

"Unless he doesn't," Laurie added. Both were equally likely. Her father came and went as the mood struck him; he called or sent presents if he thought of it.

"Maybe he'll stay for a while," Fen suggested.

And Laurie knew the part he didn't say, *and then I can stay with you*. Fen had no real home. Uncle Eddy had been locked up the past few years for some crime no one would talk about in front of either of them, and Aunt Lillian had packed her bags years ago. Fen moved between the relatives like a bag of hand-me-down clothes. When Laurie's father was around for a while, he was likely to invite Fen to live with them. Once he left, Fen moved out. Laurie's mother never *said* he had to go, but Fen always did—and her mother never stopped him.

“Can you just try not to fight with Matt? Or anyone?” she blurted.

Fen stopped, gave her a look, and then resumed walking.

“It’ll be easier if you don’t fight with him.” She grabbed Fen’s forearm. “Mom worries about your influence on Jordie, and if Dad does stay, it’d be nice if you came home, too.”

They rounded the corner and were almost at her apartment building. The drab beige building sat like a squat stone giant from one of the stories that they all had to learn in sixth-grade English class. Fire escapes that the landlord insisted were scenic balconies clung to the side of the building. The red and blue swaths of spray-painted graffiti were the only colors to be seen.

Fen gave her a quick hug, a sure sign that he was feeling guilty, before he said, “I’ll try to keep out of trouble, but I’m not going to sissy out.”

That was the best she could hope for. Fen didn’t really look for trouble, but it found him—and her—more often than not. Or maybe they simply didn’t resist trouble very well. That was what her mom thought. *I can stay out of trouble, though.* She’d had a few visits to Principal Phelps and that one little misunderstanding at the lockers, but mostly, she’d stayed out of trouble lately, which would totally change if she started spending more time with Fen.

He didn’t have many friends, so she always felt bad when she didn’t hang out with him, but she felt just as bad when

she was grounded all the time. He didn't get into half as much trouble when she was around him, but she got into twice as much. Like tonight, all she knew for sure was that he'd said he needed her with him, and she'd come along. She wasn't sure if he was trying to break the shield or take it. With Vetrarblot—the big festival for the start of winter—coming, either one would be a problem.

Laurie ran up the stairs to her apartment. Her mother was working nights at the hospital, so one of the neighbors, Mrs. Weaver, stayed with them after school, but she didn't really enforce the whole get-home-right-away thing. She did, however, insist that Laurie be in the apartment before Jordie went to bed. Laurie took a couple more deep breaths as she ran up the rest of the steps to their fourth-floor apartment. It wasn't quite high enough to have an elevator, but it was enough steps to complain about, as far as she was concerned. If they ever got hit by a tornado—which was a risk in South Dakota—she was pretty sure they'd all die. The apartments all had storage units in the basement, and her mother swore they could get downstairs fast enough if the time came, but that was five floors' worth of stairs. They'd waited a couple storms out in the storage unit, but mostly they stayed upstairs in the apartment, waiting and listening, and planned to run down all those steps if necessary. It was a bad plan.

She thought about that as she reached her floor, unlocked the door, and went inside. The lights were off, and the flicker of the television cast strange flashes of light into the room. Even though Mrs. Weaver would be leaving soon, Laurie still locked the door.

“You’re late,” Mrs. Weaver said as Laurie walked into the living room.

“Is Jordie asleep?”

Mrs. Weaver shook her head. “Unless he’s started snoring in the sounds of explosions and spaceships, no, he’s not asleep.”

“Then I’m not late,” Laurie pointed out. “Curfew is before Jordie’s asleep, so—”

“Nice try, missy.” Mrs. Weaver’s mouth was trying not to curl into a smile, though.

Laurie opened the door to her little brother’s room. Piles of books and toys were everywhere, but Mom wouldn’t yell at him. Jordie was her “little angel,” the baby who didn’t worry her. If his school called, it was to say what a great job he did or what award he was getting. *He should’ve been a Thorsen.*

“Good night,” she said. “Stop blowing things up.”

“A volcano blew up for real!” Jordie squirmed in his bed, flopping over so he could see her.

“A what?”

“Volcano.” Jordie made another explosion noise. “The whole top blew off like a rocket. Isn’t that cool? Lava and smoke and—”

“Mom doesn’t like you watching the news.” Laurie sighed.

“And she doesn’t like you being out this late. I won’t tell if you don’t,” Jordie said, with the sort of bargaining powers that had kept him in gummy bears for months.

She rolled her eyes, but she still said, “Deal.”

After she’d pulled the door shut, she went back out to the living room. Mrs. Weaver had gathered up her knitting needles and was slipping on her shoes. They said their goodnights, and Laurie curled up on the sofa with her math homework.

The sound of the lock turning woke her. Sort of. Sleepily, she let her mom direct her to bed. It wasn’t like Laurie usually worried, but the whole episode with Fen tonight had freaked her out a lot. If Matt would’ve stayed out of it, she could’ve talked Fen into leaving the shield alone. *Maybe*. Either way, though, Matt didn’t need to throw that light thing or whatever it was he did.

“Saw Fen,” she told her mother.

“Laurie . . .” The tone that her mom always had when she talked about Fen was already there; even half-asleep, Laurie heard it. It meant *Fen’s bad news, stay away from him*.

“He’s family,” Laurie murmured as she crawled into her bed.

Her mother pulled a cover over her. “One of these times he’s going to get you into the sort of trouble you aren’t ready for. Then what will you do?”

“Handle it.” Laurie snuggled into her bed. “I can handle it.”

A few hours later, Laurie woke with the vague sense of suffocation, which wasn’t entirely unexpected because she had woken up as a . . . *fish*—a salmon, to be precise.

I am a fish.

She’d gone to sleep as a perfectly average thirteen-year-old girl and woken up as a fish, and as much as she’d like to try to figure out how that had happened, she had a more pressing concern: air. Salmon needed water to get that, and since she was a girl when she’d crawled into her bed, she was now a fish nowhere near water.

Her fishy eyes spied a sports bottle, and she felt a flicker of hope, but the lack of thumbs and the inability to put a salmon in a bottle made that useless as far as solutions go.

She flopped around on her bed, torn between trying to figure out how not to be a fish and trying to decide if she could flop her way to water—and trying to wake up for real because the odds of this being a bad dream seemed pretty high . . . except she felt awake.

I can’t be a fish. It’s a dream. No. I’m really a salmon.

The only water nearby was the toilet, and flopping her way into that germey thing sounded gross . . . but the need for air outweighed the sheer nastiness of trying to swim in a toilet.

With a burst of energetic wiggling, she managed to launch herself from her bed. She hit the floor, her fall cushioned by the piles of clothes strewn all through the room. She wriggled her way across the clothes, books, and accumulated junk on her floor—and hit the closed door.

I need help. I need Fen.

If fish could cry, Laurie would be weeping. The thought of dying as a fish, of her mother finding a stinky dead fish on the floor, was far from good.

Where is Fen?

Her cousin should be here; he should help her. That's how it worked: they helped each other, but he wasn't here, and she was going to die. Her gills opened and closed rapidly as she panicked, too exhausted to even try to figure out how a salmon could open a door.

The door opened, and Laurie stared up at her rescuer. *Not Mom. Not Dad. Not Fen.* Her little brother stood in her doorway. "Why are you on the floor?"

"Because I'm a fish," she said.

Jordie stared at her. He opened his mouth, apparently thought better of whatever he was going to say, and closed it. He shrugged.

“Can you open the bathroom door and put me in the tub? My fins—”

“You’re kind of weird.” He turned away.

“Is she awake?” Her mother called.

“Yeah, but she says she’s a fish,” Jordie yelled back to their mother.

Laurie took a deep breath . . . and realized that she had no gills. “I can breathe!” She looked around her room. The bed-covers were tangled, and she was on the floor. It had been a dream—a vivid dream, but not real. Girls don’t turn into fish. She went over and sat on the bed—and was still sitting there half-dazed when her mother walked into her room.

“Honey? Are you okay?” Her mother leaned down and kissed her forehead, checking for fever. “Jordie said you had a bad dream.”

“I was a fish,” Laurie said, looking up at her mother. “Fen wasn’t here, and I was going to die because Fen wasn’t helping me.”

Her mother sighed and sat next to her. Silently, she pulled Laurie into a hug and rested her cheek against Laurie’s head. After a minute, she said, “You can’t count on boys, especially your cousin Fen. I know you care for him, but Fen’s trouble. He has no one teaching him right and wrong, and the way he’s been raised . . .”

“We could let him live here,” Laurie suggested.

Her mother’s pause held the things her mother wouldn’t

say—that she disliked Fen, that that side of the family made her uncomfortable, that the only reason she let any of them into the house was because she still loved Dad. Finally, what she did say was, “I need to think of what’s best for my kids, and having Fen around Jordie isn’t what’s best. I’m sorry.”

Laurie pulled away, got dressed, and walked out of the room. She didn’t argue with her mother. That was something she tried not to do. She felt like she started enough trouble without meaning to, so causing problems on purpose was a bad idea. She stayed quiet. She wanted to tell her mother about the dream, but she felt silly. She’d wait and talk to Fen. He was her best friend, her almost-brother, and the only person who wouldn’t think she was crazy for worrying over fish dreams.

Maybe.