



The Valhalla Prophecy: A Novel (Nina Wilde and Eddie Chase)

By Andy McDermott

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AN ANCIENT VIKING MYTH.
AND A PROPHECY OF LIFE OR DEATH.**

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Covert agents from around the world, including a ruthless mole in the IHA, are drawn into a lethal game. Then a disturbing secret surfaces from Eddie's past, involving a mission in Vietnam and a woman he tried to save. Suddenly suspicious of her own husband, Nina cannot afford to stop the perilous search for the artifact. For somewhere in a remote wilderness, two forces are about to converge: one that could save the world . . . and one that could destroy it.

Praise for the novels of Andy McDermott

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Editorial Review

Review

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About the Author

Andy McDermott is a former journalist and movie critic who now writes novels full-time following the international success of his debut thriller, *The Hunt for Atlantis*, which has been sold around the world in more than twenty languages. He is also the author of *The Tomb of Hercules*, *The Secret of Excalibur*, *The Covenant of Genesis*, *The Pyramid of Doom*, *The Sacred Vault*, *Empire of Gold*, *Return to Atlantis*, *The Valhalla Prophecy*, and *The Shadow Protocol*. He lives in Bournemouth, England.

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McDermott / THE VALHALLA PROPHECY

1

New York City Fifty-Three Years Later

“Nina, Eddie!” cried Lola Adams—née Gianetti—across the coffee shop. “Long time no see!”

Nina Wilde hopped to her feet to greet her friend. Lola had, until a few months earlier, been Nina’s personal assistant at the International Heritage Agency. The reason for her departure was peering curiously at the world around him from a papoose on the chest of Lola’s husband. “Lola, Don, hi! Wow, it’s so great to see you both again! And to meet this little guy in person for the first time. Oh, he’s beautiful!”

Nina’s own husband also stood. “Yeah, that’s not a bad-looking sprog you’ve got,” said Eddie Chase with a grin. “Shame about the name, though.”

Lola pouted. “What’s wrong with Gino? It was my grandpa’s name.”

“There’s nothing wrong with it, it’s just not as good as my suggestion. Now, Eddie—that’s a name for a baby.” He frowned. “Wait, that didn’t come out like I meant it to.”

Nina laughed. “Accurate, though.” The balding Englishman pulled a face, to which Gino responded with a gurgling laugh of his own. “Aw, look at that! He’s so sweet.”

“He is,” said Lola, embracing the pair, “when he’s not occupying every moment of my time. And I thought you were demanding, Nina!”

Now it was Nina’s turn to look affronted, while Eddie chuckled. “Come on, sit down,” he said, pulling a chair out for the young mother. “So being a parent’s a bit stressful, is it?”

“You have no idea, man,” said Don as he unfastened the papoose. “I thought being a firefighter was tough, but pulling people out of burning buildings is a cakewalk compared with watching out for a baby.”

“Don’s worse than I am,” Lola said as she sat. “There’s danger everywhere, isn’t there, hon? To him, every room looks like a death trap out of a Final Destination movie. It drives me nuts, ’cause now I can’t even plug in my hair dryer without unlocking the gadgets he’s put on all the outlets.”

“Safety’s a serious business, babe,” Don replied, in a way that suggested it was far from the first time he had been teased.

The big-haired blonde took Gino from the papoose, settling the baby on her lap. “Anyway, we’re just about getting a handle on things, so we can finally catch up with everybody. What have I missed? What have you guys been up to? Have you found any more ancient wonders or saved the world again?”

“What, since the last time?” asked Eddie with a mocking snort. “Come on, it’s only been a few months. Give us a chance.”

“I’m enjoying the fact that we haven’t been running around the world being chased and shot at and having everything blow up around us,” Nina said, with considerable relief. “It means I get to do the things I joined the IHA for in the first place. Like being an actual archaeologist, you know? Overseeing digs, research, writing papers .?.?”

Eddie yawned theatrically. “Yeah, it’s thrilling.”

“Oh, shut up,” said the redhead. “But it’s amazing how much more productive you can be when you aren’t being attacked by helicopter gunships and hunted by assassins.”

“And ninjas. Don’t forget the ninjas.”

Don’s eyebrows rose. “Babe? You are so not going back to the IHA.”

Lola kissed Gino’s head. “This little guy’s going to be my boss for the next few years, don’t worry.” She looked back at Nina. “If things are nice and easy at work, is that giving you more time to plan things at home?”

“What things?” Nina asked.

“You know.” Lola held up Gino, who let out a little squeak of delight, and kissed him again. “Family matters.”

“Yeah,” added Don. “You’ve been married for, what, two or three years now? I’m surprised you don’t have kids already.”

Nina found herself feeling surprisingly defensive. "My work hasn't been exactly conducive to it, what with all the .?.?. ninjas and world saving."

The burly firefighter nodded. "But now everything's quieted down, you're thinking about it, yeah? I mean, you don't want to leave it too late."

Eddie huffed. "We're not that old." He put on a crotchety old man's voice. "I'm hip to all the popular tunes of today's young people, you know." Lola laughed.

"You're past forty, though, right? Me, I've just gone thirty and Lola's coming up on it, and we were worried that might be pushing it—"

"Donnyyyyy," said Lola, singsong, through her teeth. Her husband got the message and clammed up. "So, what's new at the IHA? How's my replacement working out?"

"Melinda?" Nina said. "She's fine, she's doing a good job." Seeing Lola's face fall ever so slightly, she continued, "Nearly as good as you." The younger woman brightened. "Okay, what else? Al Little got a job with Apple in California, Lucy DeMille got engaged, Bill Schofield got promoted—oh, and we got a new UN liaison after Sebastian Penrose, uh, retired." The United Nations official's departure had been under a cloud, to say the least, but to avoid a media scandal the details were covered up. Nina had been dismayed at that, but the decision was made at far higher political levels than she had influence over. "A guy called Oswald Seretse."

Lola searched her memory, then nodded. "Oh—his dad's a diplomat too, isn't he? I met them at the UN once, before I transferred to the IHA."

"Yeah, I think so. Anyway, that's all the big stuff."

"You should come 'round to the office sometime," Eddie suggested. "There's a lot of people who'd love to see you and your nipper."

"Maybe I will," said Lola. She looked down at her son. "Would you like to see where Mommy worked before she had you? Would you, little snooky-wooky?" Gino did not appear enthused by the prospect.

"Just make sure there aren't any frickin' ninjas there that day," Don said.

"There won't be," Eddie assured him. "I shot 'em all." The firefighter's expression wavered between amusement and a suspicion that the Englishman was not joking.

"Everyone would love to see you. And Gino," said Nina.

Lola smiled. "Then we'll come."

"Good! In the meantime, I think it's time for some caffeine. What do you want?"

Lola and Don named their choices, then Nina turned to Eddie, only to find him looking at Gino, lost in thought. "Eddie?"

He snapped back. "Hmm?"

“You okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. Just thinking about something, that’s all. What?”

“Coffee?”

“I’ll get ’em. What’s everyone having?”

Nina stood. “It’s okay, I’ll go. You want your usual?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

She headed for the counter, looking back to find him again seeming preoccupied before returning to the conversation.

•••

The same look was on his face that evening.

Nina was curled up in an armchair reading a book, ignoring the television. She raised her eyes to see her husband, stretched out on the sofa, paying just as little attention to the events on screen. “Earth to Eddie.”

He blinked and lifted his head. “What?”

“You were miles away. Penny for your thoughts?”

“Sounds like a good deal,” he said. “If I’d had a penny every time I’d had a thought, I’d probably have about .?.?. oh, three pounds seventeen by now.”

“That much?” They both smiled. “So what’s on your mind? You had that same look this afternoon when we were with Lola and Don.”

Eddie hesitated before replying. “I was thinking about .?.?. well, what Don said. About having kids.” He sat up. “I’m wondering if he had a point. Do we want to have kids, and if we do, are we leaving it too late?”

“We’ve still got plenty of time to decide,” she assured him. “Like you told him, we’re not that old.”

He didn’t seem convinced. “I dunno. I’m past forty now, you’re coming up on thirty-five .?.?. I mean, Christ, my mum and dad were only twenty-one when they had me.”

“Times change, though. People had kids when they were younger back then. My parents were in their mid-twenties when I was born.”

“I suppose.”

Realizing that the matter was still bothering him, she put down her book and joined him on the sofa. “Hey,” she said, putting her arms around him, “do you want to have kids?”

Another pause. “I don’t know. I really don’t,” he said, closing a hand around hers. “I mean, it’s not like we

haven't talked about it before, and it's one of those things you just sort of assume'll happen after you get married. But .?.?. there've been things that got in the way. Like mad cults and lost cities and psychos trying to start World War Three."

She grinned. "Minor distractions, then."

"Yeah. Most people just worry about how it's going to affect their careers. We keep having the weight of the bloody world dumped on us."

"It's not really something you want to make a child deal with, is it? Probably a good thing we haven't had one after all."

Nina had meant the comment lightheartedly, but a sudden downcast twinge to his expression—which he hurriedly tried to hide—warned her that Eddie had taken it more seriously. "Hey, hey," she said apologetically, "I was joking. I'm not ruling it out, not at all. But our lives have been, well .?.?. complicated."

"Yeah, I know." He intertwined his fingers with hers and squeezed her hand, then kissed her cheek. "Although .?.?."

"What?"

"Well, things are a bit less complicated at the moment, aren't they? All the IHA's operations are ticking along without any trouble—"

"Don't jinx it!"

He laughed. "I'm right, though, aren't I? The Atlantis dig's back up to speed after what happened last year; the Egyptians asked us to help with the tomb of Alexander the Great—"

"If that's what it really is," Nina cut in. Even the top experts in the field were not entirely certain whether the new excavations in Alexandria would bear fruit.

"Whatever, we've still got our hand in. And the Indian government's working with us on the Vault of Shiva, and even the Peruvians are letting the IHA get involved with what's happening at El Dorado."

"Grudgingly," she said, with a flash of professional annoyance.

"The point is, they've still asked for our help. So we've got all these digs going on at once, and you know what? They're all going smoothly."

"You are so jinxing it!"

Eddie grinned. "They're going smoothly," he insisted, "and you know why? Because you put people in charge of each of 'em who know what they're doing. So that means you don't have to micromanage everything anymore."

She treated him to a particularly sulky scowl. "What do you mean, 'anymore'?"

“No, you never once looked over anyone’s shoulder and told them to dig six inches to the left, did you?” he said, kissing her again. “But the IHA’s in a quiet patch at the moment. We’ve been talking about taking a break for a while—maybe now’s the time. And there’s the book thing too.”

“Right, the book thing,” Nina echoed. It was her turn to become thoughtful. “I still don’t know what I want to do about that.”

“What’s to think about? For fuck’s sake, love, they’re offering you six figures to write about all the stuff you’ve discovered! I know it’s not like we desperately need the money or anything”—he waved a hand to encompass their Upper East Side apartment—“but you’ve got to admit it’d be a hell of a bonus. Christ, if you want I’ll write everything up for you. Although I can’t type, so I’ll have to scribble it all down in biro.”

“Just make sure you leave out all the things that are top secret,” she reminded him, amused. “Oh, and the part where you were wanted for murder by Interpol.”

“And the part where you got a faceful of crap while you were crawling through a sewer pipe.”

She grimaced at the memory. “It’s all glamour being a famous archaeologist, isn’t it?”

Eddie sniffed her cheek. “You got most of it off. This book, though—it might be the perfect time to take a bit of a break and write it, while things are quiet at work. And we could also do some”—a lascivious smirk crept across his square face—“other stuff.”

Nina feigned innocence. “What kind of stuff, Mr. Chase?”

“Oh, you know. Shagging like rabbits.”

She laughed, swatting his hand off hers. “There’s that subtle charm I fell in love with.”

“Yeah, it’s irresistible, innit? I’m serious, though, and not just about a nonstop fuck-fest.” Nina giggled. “I mean about the book, and having a break from work. We could take a really long holiday, somewhere we haven’t been before—and with absolutely nothing to do with archaeology.”

Now she feigned horror. “Oh, let’s not do anything crazy .?.?”

“Grant invited us out to Hollywood, remember? We could do that as part of a West Coast tour, maybe—start off in Seattle, then go down through San Francisco to LA to watch him filming his next movie. Even though it’ll probably be as big a piece of crap as his last one.”

“I thought you liked action movies.”

“I like good action movies. Nitrous 2 was absolute bollocks, though.”

“I think you mean Ni-two-rous,” Nina corrected with a smile. Their movie-star friend Grant Thorn’s most recent film had gone by the rather awkward moniker of Ni2rous on its posters, providing a source of endless amusement to the couple—as well as late-night talk show hosts.

“Yeah, when nobody even knows how to pronounce the title, that’s probably a bad start. It really was complete arse, though. That bit where he dived out of the car that went over the cliff and fired a grappling

hook to grab hold of his mate's car that was jumping the other way? That was so fucking unrealistic they might as well have had him grow wings."

"It wasn't any more unbelievable than his other movies, and you liked those."

"I used to like 'em. Maybe I'm growing old."

Her smile returned, wider. "Maybe you're growing up."

Eddie snorted. "No danger of that, love. But I've got to admit, these days I'm happy just to watch Matt Damon moving purposefully for two hours. Still, actually getting to see Grant filming should be fun. Something to tell the grandkids."

"That kinda presupposes kids," said Nina. "I guess this conversation's come around full circle."

He shifted position to face her. "So .?.?. what's your view on that? You're .?.?." He paused, choosing his words. "You're not dead set against it, are you?"

She also gave careful consideration to her reply. "No," she said at last. "No, I'm not against it. It's just that, like I said, our lives have been complicated. But if things did get more straightforward, then .?.?." Another moment of thought. "I wouldn't say no."

From the look of delight Eddie was trying hard to contain, it was clear he was happy with her answer. "Nor would I."

They kissed, then held each other tight. "It's a big decision, though," Nina said at last.

"Yeah, taking a sabbatical to get paid half a million dollars and have loads of sex. Big decision."

Nina prodded him in the stomach, making him flinch and laugh. "I don't mean like that. It's more about .?.?. well, what Don blurted out." She became more serious. "We are getting on, in a purely biological sense. The risks start to increase almost geometrically every year once a woman passes thirty, and the older the man is, the greater the likelihood of complications too."

"What kind of complications?"

"Just getting pregnant in the first place becomes harder, for a start. Then there are things like an increased risk of pre-eclampsia, high blood pressure, gestational diabetes—"

"I thought you were a doctor of archaeology, not pregnancy!"

"Ah, well," she admitted sheepishly, "when Lola was still at work, I got worried about her and the baby's health, so I did some reading about any potential problems she might have. What?" she went on, seeing his mocking expression. "She's the first close friend I've had who's been pregnant. I wanted to be prepared if anything happened to her!"

He chuckled. "See? This is that whole micromanagement thing again. Pretty sure the UN has a couple of actual medical doctors on staff somewhere."

“Oh, shut up,” she said, jabbing him again. “The point is, it made me realize that the odds of anything going wrong with Lola’s pregnancy were pretty low—but the risks start rising once a woman gets to my age.”

“But they should still be pretty low,” Eddie said. “I mean, you’re in good nick—you exercise, you’re not a lard-arse, you don’t eat junk, you don’t even drink all that much anymore. And I’m still in exactly the same shape I was in when I left the SAS.”

Nina eyed his midsection skeptically. “Uh-huh.”

He made a rude sound. “Okay, so maybe I’ve put on a little weight in nine years. But I’m not spending every day running twenty miles with a full pack of gear anymore, so what do you expect? Anyway, we’re both in decent nick, so that should put us in a better position than most people our age right from the start.”

“It’s not just about health, though. There are some things that are still a danger even if both people are in perfect condition. I don’t want to be morbid and depressing, but the chances of a miscarriage go up enormously after thirty. And then there are higher risks of delivery complications, birth defects—”

“Birth defects?” Eddie said sharply, straightening.

“Yeah, I’m afraid so. Autism’s more common in kids with older parents, as well as Down syndrome and other genetic disorders.” She took in his oddly stricken expression. “What’s wrong? Sorry, I didn’t mean to bring you down so much.”

He shook his head. “No, it’s okay.”

“Is that something you’re worried about?” But there was something deeper to his reaction, she realized. “Something you’ve seen?”

His reply took a moment in coming. “Yeah.”

“Where?”

“On a job,” he said, tone becoming brusquer. “Can’t talk about it.”

After six years together, she was attuned enough to her husband to pick up the nuances of those rare occasions when he discussed his professional past—first as a British special forces soldier, then a hired troubleshooter. “A job, not a mission?” The difference was small, but crucial. The latter were covered by the laws of state security; any secrets from the second stage of his career, however, would be kept for more personal reasons.

“Doesn’t matter. Let’s just say I’ve seen that kind of stuff. And that I don’t really want to talk about it.”

Nina decided not to push him. “Okay, no problem. You and your secrets, though,” she continued, deliberately teasing in the hope of changing the subject. “I think I know you fairly well by now. And after everything we’ve been through together, I can’t believe there’s anything in your past that could shock me.”

Eddie smiled. “Nah, probably not.”

But she couldn’t help noticing that he hesitated before replying.

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