

PROLOGUE

The snow was falling like it only does on Christmas cards when the two men found her body. They did not mind the snow. Being Icelandic, they knew that January was filled with snow, even after all the Christmas cards had been discarded, thrown in the recycled paper bin to be forgotten. In fact, both men would, in their private moments, think to themselves that there had been nothing unusual about that night at all. They were members of the Reykjavík Metropolitan Police Department, both of them serving proudly as patrolmen. Ragnar, with his grey hair and pot belly, was a good twenty-five years older than his partner, Eiríkur. This meant that, at the start of their shift two hours earlier, it had fallen to the younger man to get the ice off the windshield of their police cruiser. Scraping at the windshield in the parking lot of the downtown police headquarters, it took Eiríkur the better part of ten minutes to finally clear the ice, which had spread across the glass like a disease. Rubbing his hands together and cursing to himself, he slid into the passenger seat while Ragnar chuckled in the heated driver's seat.

"You're doing it next time." Eiríkur mumbled, more to himself than his partner, as he shut the door and pulled the seatbelt across his body.

"Not a chance in hell." Ragnar laughed as he released the handbrake. "But in fifteen years I'll be retired and you will have your own partner to do shit like this."

Eiríkur and Ragnar had been partners for ten years and friends for nine of them. Their partnership had had a rocky start, as Ragnar was not overly fond of being saddled with a handsome, cocky young officer who thought he knew everything there was to know. Only some of those attributes had faded over the years, as Eiríkur still caught the eye of beautiful women and had only gotten better at irritating Ragnar, but the two had become good friends. It was a friendship built on trust and, though Ragnar would not readily admit it, affection. The older man treasured his relationship with his partner and would lament its erosion following that cold night.

It was almost three in the morning and, circling the city centre for the second time that night, Ragnar had begun yearning for his bed, feeling his wife's huddled form pressed against his own. The snow fell heavier, the windshield wipers straining to keep up, and Ragnar felt an unease settle in his bones as he carefully made a left turn off the

deserted main street, the wheels of the car straining to keep their hold on the ice-covered asphalt. Entering a quiet neighbourhood a stone's throw away from the centre, his eyes scanned the near-identical houses and the slumbering vehicles parked in their driveways. Ragnar sighed, dreading the morning traffic and the collisions and fender-benders that were inevitable this time of year. He had just finished thanking his lucky star that he and Eiríkur had gotten the night shift duty when his partner's voice snapped him back to attention.

“Stop the car!”

Ragnar slammed his feet down on the breaks and the wheels locked, the car sliding a short distance before coming to a stop. The freshly fallen snow sat pristine upon the earth all around them, untouched but for a pair of wheel tracks that swerved off the road. His eyes following their path, Ragnar finally saw what Eiríkur had seen. To their right was a lone car, a pitch black contrast to its surroundings. The hood, once sleek and polished, had crumpled like a piece of paper when the car had mounted the sidewalk and come to a violent stop as it met the low concrete wall. Smoke billowed from the ruined engine as the vehicle, in its death throes, bathed the snow in the blinking glow of hazard lights. Years of training and experience kicked in as Ragnar sprang out of the police cruiser, the snow crunching beneath his feet, and Eiríkur followed. Ragnar sprinted towards the wreck, a sharp pain in his timeworn knees, as Eiríkur stood back and barked his request for an ambulance into his radio.

Ragnar approached the car from behind, realizing as he drew nearer that the driver's seat was empty. For a moment he wondered if whoever had been driving had stumbled out of the car, but his hopes were crushed as he saw the windshield. A bloody, grotesque hole had been smashed into the glass as something was hurled through it, cracks spreading across it like a spider's web. His eyes followed the trajectory over the brick wall and into the lot on the other side.

“Oh, Jesus.”

Blood stained the disturbed snow where a figure lay on its back. Hesitant, Ragnar vaulted the barrier with a low grunt and edged closer to the body, calling out in vain. The woman had tumbled several meters before coming to a stop on her back, her arms spread out to her sides and her feet shattered and splayed out like those of a doll's. Kneeling in the snow beside her, Ragnar muttered a silent prayer. Her body was broken,

blood pooling beneath it and turning the snow into a red, sickly slush. Blonde hair covered most of her face, hanging in bloody clumps across her head. An open gash in her temple sent even more crimson cascading onto the snow. He could see her eyes, staring up at him pleadingly, their pale blue light extinguished. Her mouth hung open but there was no sound. Eiríkur stood over his partner now, his laboured breathing turning into steam in the cold night air, and he was silent as he took in the form of the mutilated snow angel before them. “Oh, no..” he muttered.

The woman’s coat hung loosely around her shoulders, revealing a bloodied nightgown beneath. It had been torn by the glass and countless cuts covered her body. Ragnar looked up from her eyes for the first time, as Eiríkur partly covered his mouth. Their eyes examining her form, they looked down to her stomach, and its prominent bump.

She was pregnant.

Both men had seen fatal accidents before. They had seen lives ended in twisted heaps of burning metal, seen bodies shattered and scorched. But in that moment, something marked them. They felt a cold hand reach into their souls and grab hold. Something that would never let go. Something that would stay with them until their own time came, and their own fading eyes stared up at what no one else could see.

They could hear sirens now. And in that moment they wept as the snow came down upon them, blanketing the scene as if the land itself was trying to bury what had taken place there. But the truth always reaches the surface eventually, for that is the way of these things.

“Desolation comes upon the sky
and I see fire.”

I See Fire – Ed Sheeran

Chapter 1

When he pulled out the knife I figured I might be in trouble.

No more than five minutes earlier I had stumbled out of the bar, the cold night air sending a chill down my spine despite the considerable protection afforded to me by my alcohol consumption. I heard the heavy clang of the lock behind me as the bartender began closing up shop. He had ushered me out gently, but obviously hoping to get home as soon as possible. Even so, a couple of minutes before he closed up I had managed to convince him that one more drink was all I needed.

At least one of us believed it.

Shivering, I shoved my hands into the pockets of my beat up leather jacket, watched my breath rise and dissipate into the night and, allowing the world to come slightly into focus, began my shuffle home. Much to my chagrin, the bars in Iceland were only open to one AM on weekdays, but I had no qualms about continuing my drinking at home. That was the plan, at least, until I heard the girl scream.

It pierced the air and stopped me dead in my tracks. For a moment I thought I had imagined it, my nightmares finally spilling over into my waking moments, for the alcohol would only keep them at bay for so long. The sounds of struggle came from a building to my left, and I craned my neck and squinted. The building itself was like many others in the city centre, a decrepit thing that looked like nobody had expected it to last this long. The windows were caked with grime so thick you could shoot at it without breaking the glass and, if you looked closely, you could see the actual colour of the building through all the graffiti. The rain gutter hung loosely on the edges of the roof, like a decaying predator waiting for the right moment to strike. Two forms were huddled against the side of the building, hidden from the glare of the streetlamps. Most people knew better than to go looking in dark alleyways at this time of night, and those who did steal a glance would be forgiven for thinking they had happened upon two lovers. But the muffled cries reached me and pulled me closer.

“Hey!” I shouted, lumbering into the darkness.

The shapes continued squirming, and my blood boiled with each stifled plea. I shouted once again, and for a moment the shapes were still. I stopped a few yards away, almost tripping over the curb, and the cold wind brought me the scent of perfume, sweat

and fear. The shapes suddenly shifted, separating into two silhouettes, the larger barking something at me in Icelandic.

“Leave the girl alone, asshole,” I called back, speaking slowly so as not to slur my words.

I could hear the man laugh. It was a low, rumbling sound devoid of warmth.

“Fuck off, American,” he growled in broken English. “Or I will send you home in two pieces.”

“Leave the girl alone or I’ll break your nose.”

For a moment everything went quiet. Slowly, but surely, the larger shape detached itself completely from the smaller one and turned towards me. It took him two heavy steps to reach the street, his figure suddenly illuminated. He was no taller than me, but he more than made up for it in mass. He had long, black hair that reached his shoulders, an unkempt beard to match, and his t-shirt threatened to tear under the sheer girth of his massive frame. A large, white skull with blades for teeth adorned his chest. It was the logo of a local motorcycle club, although I would not learn this until later, with a gun pressed against my temple. The stench of him reached me, filling my nostrils with the ghosts of cheap cigarettes and cheaper booze. All in all, he looked like the kind of man you would need a bulldozer to move if he fell asleep on your lawn. He glared at me for a moment, and when he spoke the bass of his voice seemed to rattle my bones.

“What did you say?”

The smaller shape freed itself from the wall and stepped carefully out into the light. Her light-brown hair covered most of her face, but I could see the tears streaming from her mascara-stained eyes. The dark red of her lipstick reached her cheek, and I could see her upper arm beginning to bruise where he held her. She looked at me for a moment, fear coming off her like a cornered animal, as she clawed at her torn, green dress. She cast a frightful glance at her assailant before taking off down the street, the soft knock of her heels on the asphalt echoing in the night.

“You think you are a big, American hero?” the thug growled, but I figured it was rhetorical. “Are you feeling like a hero now?”

With surprising swiftness he produced the knife from his pants pocket, the four inch blade extending from a brown handle, the stainless steel of it glistening. Even in my drunken state I had fully expected to receive a beating, but I was less fond of the

idea of being stabbed and bleeding out on the street. His lips twisted into a grin as he raised his arm and lunged at me, the knife slicing the air down towards me. In the blink of an eye the drunken haze lifted from my mind and my body reacted. Half-remembered training sessions and seminars came flooding back and I moved almost without realizing. The hand in which the man held his weapon came barrelling down at me, and I immediately raised my own left arm, blocking the attack. My right hand shot forward and delivered a swift strike to his throat. His eyes grew wide as he choked on his own breath, the knife tumbling from his hand and hitting the ground. I twisted my hips and brought my left hand under his right, twisting it with me as I moved to his back. His pained screams were punctuated by the soft pop of his shoulder dislocating. I released my grip and the man fell, his hulking body collapsing onto the cold ground like a heap of trash.

My heart raced and my head throbbed, the anger coursing through me like a drug. A movement from across the street caught my eye, and I looked up to see a group of four young men staring at me. Two of them had their phones pointed at me, filming the scene as if their cameras afforded them a degree of separation from the violence in front of them, excusing their voyeurism. I looked down at the man at my feet as he rolled onto his back, cradling his arm and whining softly.

“I’ll fucking kill you, you mother-“

The rage inside me flared, a monster baring its teeth. I knelt down and grabbed his shirt, lifting his head off the ground. I raised my fist and brought it down into his face, and I felt his nose break under it, a sickening crack that seemed to echo down the street. His head hung limp and blood streamed from his nose as I lowered his head gently down onto the concrete.

I stood back up and looked over to the group, who had now all begun filming, barely containing their excitement.

“I hate to ruin your movie,” I called over, rubbing my bruised knuckle. “but if one of you auteurs could call the police, that would be great.”

* * *

“Michael McMorrow.”

My eyes had been glued to the stained, beige table in the interrogation room for around twenty minutes when the sound of my name and a door shutting pulled my gaze upwards. A middle-aged man pulled up a chair and sat down opposite me, as he slid a small paper cup across the table. I reached out and felt warmth spread through my hand as I pulled the cup closer and let the scent of stale coffee rid me of whatever buzz I was still feeling. My head ached as I looked up, the light of the fluorescent bulb stinging my eyes.

“Sorry for keeping you waiting.” The man seemed half-sincere, which was twice as much as the officer who had brought me to the police station and told me to wait. “My name is Ólafur.”

The man, who I guessed was a detective, wore a white, crumpled shirt and a blue tie with red, horizontal lines that made my eyes hurt if I looked for too long. He was middle-aged but wore it well, with only a few wrinkles branching out from the corners of his eyes and mouth. Grey mixed with a thinning black at his temples, and his nose was slightly crooked.

“Oh, this makes it all worth it.” I raised the cup of coffee and took a sip, immediately regretting it.

“Good to hear.” He smiled, and I wondered if he had missed the sarcasm or just didn’t care. “So you’re American?”

I nodded, taking note of his accent, or complete lack thereof. In my experience, most Icelanders spoke with a heavy accent, but once in a while I would meet one whose grasp on the English language was almost better than mine.

“That would explain it.” He chuckled.

“My stunning good looks?” I offered, taking another sip of what I could only assume was the contents of a sewage pipe.

“Funny.”

He smiled, but it went no deeper than his mouth.

“So why don’t you tell me what happened, Mr. McMorrow?”

“You seem to have a pretty good idea.” I slid the cup to the side, the stench of it making me ill.

“Humour me.” He tilted his head slightly, like an annoyed parent would.

“I was walking home when I heard a woman scream. I saw this guy being an asshole, so I taught him some manners.”

“Pretty impressive. He’s a big asshole.” Ólafur smiled, only a bit more genuine this time.

“They come in all sizes, I hear.” I leaned back and the shoddy chair creaked under my weight. “Can I go now? I have some self-medicating I’d love to get back to.”

Ólafur sat back and smoothed his tie, inspecting it as if it was worth more than the two dollars he likely bought it for. “The good news is those kids caught the whole thing on their camera phones, so your story checks out.”

“And the bad news?” I waited.

“The bad news is those kids caught the whole damn thing on their camera phones.” Ólafur sighed, and leaned closer. “The man whose face you rearranged is a violent, degenerate scumbag who I have been doing my best to put in prison for a while now. Him and his friends.”

I scoffed. “Good job so far.”

“This is not a joke, Mr. McMorro. He is a criminal, through and through, and he and his friends are not the types to let things like this go.”

“Yeah.” I sighed. “I know the type.”

Ólafur’s brow furrowed and he failed to hide his curiosity. My new friend had the poker face of a six-year-old. “I heard you were NYPD.”

“A long time ago.”

I grew up in Queens, the largest of New York’s five boroughs. Back then, you could hardly turn a corner without seeing a policeman, coasting down the street in a cruiser or patrolling the neighbourhood on foot. I remember looking up at them in awe, mesmerised by the shine of their shields and the pride with which they carried themselves. The minute I turned eighteen I applied to the academy, and three years later I was handed a gun and a badge of my own. It took me four years to make detective, and a year after that I was assigned to the Major Case Squad. I was thirty-four now, and had not worn a badge or felt the weight of a gun on my side for a long time.

“Your name sounded familiar, so I looked you up online,” Ólafur said, a hint of admiration in his voice mixed with apprehension. His inner debate of whether or not to go on played out on his face.

Ólafur cleared his throat and continued. “Just so you know, had I found that monster I would have done the same thing.”

Monster.

For a moment everything falls away, the walls of the interrogation room tumble from view and my mind takes me back to New York. I rub the sweat from my eyes, as more cascades down my forehead. The apartment is like a long forgotten crypt in the depths of hell, a sweltering darkness that swallows whole any living thing that enters. I feel the gun, cold in my hand, my finger hovering above the trigger, the calm before the storm. A man looks up at me, fear oozing out of his every pore, his eyes wild and desperate. I hear him begging and he soils himself on the floor. The stench of him fills my nostrils, mixing with the stink of rotting meat and excrement. I can smell the lives lost here, and my insides churn. For a moment there is silence. Then I squeeze the trigger.

Hero.

The memory hit me like a train. That apartment was long gone, and what took place there irreversible, solidified in history by the passage of time. But some piece of that darkness had latched itself onto me, its claws embedded in me, never to let go.

I finally looked up to see Ólafur staring at me, one eyebrow arched. I was not entirely sure how long had passed in silence, but I assumed it was no more than a few seconds.

“Yeah, well.” I sighed, pushing my chair away from the table and standing up. “Let’s hope you never have to.”

He nodded silently as I walked past him and grabbed the doorknob, twisted and pulled, and my knuckles throbbed. He offered me a ride to my apartment, but it was only a ten minute walk from the police station. Besides, I felt I had had enough human interaction for one night.

“Mister McMorro, be careful,” he said, and I nodded as I made my way outside. “And I was sorry to hear about your wife.”

I paused, looking down the corridor.

“Me too.”

Chapter 2

She had been crying when I first met her, almost ten years ago. I entered the loft, my eyes scanning the wide open space before settling on the woman who stood, anxiously cradling her own arms, awaiting my arrival. I had been a detective for only a couple of years, and the woman's initial expression was the sort of look that young doctors had to put up with for the first third of their careers. The remnants of tears trailed down her pale face, her soft features marked by small blotches of smeared make-up. She wore a black tank top that hugged her body and tan cargo pants, both caked in streaks of dry paint. Thick, blonde hair was held back in a ponytail, and blue, brilliant eyes looked up at me. Behind her, large windows let the summer sun wash over the entire apartment, the form of her engulfed in a golden aura as if her beauty refused to be contained. Her name was Karen, she told me, and she was from Iceland. I would have been less surprised if she had told me she just arrived from Mars.

She was an artist, and a successful one that that, staying in New York for an exhibition of her paintings at a prestigious art gallery in the city. Since she only intended to stay in America until the end of summer, the most reasonably priced apartment had won out during her search for a place to live. To be fair, the listing didn't exactly advertise the drug den across the street. The apartment had been broken into while Karen had met with some friends, and much of the artwork she had been keeping there was stolen. She dug out a large, blue folder and flipped through a collection of photos of her paintings, pointing out the ones that had had been taken. Most of her paintings were of landscapes from above, as if she had been granted wings and painted what she saw. Mountains, hillsides, abandoned churches and small towns, periodically replaced by incredibly detailed images of various birds

"They're beautiful," I told her. "They make me feel...free, somehow."

I chuckled, feeling a child-like sense of embarrassment. "I don't know, I'm not what you would call an expert."

"No, no," she said, smiling for the first time since I had arrived. "That's how they make me feel, too."

Our eyes locked, like two pieces of a puzzle coming together. I gave her my card and promised her I would do my best to get her paintings back.

Much to my surprise, the owner of the building had actually set up security cameras outside. The following day I got the tapes and sat at my desk, my eyes glued to the computer screen, scouring the faces of everyone who came and went. A thuggish looking man had entered the building roughly fifteen minutes after Karen had left, exiting twenty minutes later with several of her paintings. After digging through some mug shots I finally found him; a shining example of human decency with a rap sheet that could have supplied an entire fraternity with a month's worth of toilet paper. A day later I had him in custody and, that evening, had recovered all but one of Karen's paintings, which had been damaged during the burglary. Karen cried when I brought the paintings back to her, and she hugged me. We both lingered for a while, preserving the sensation of the embrace, before she let go and wiped the tears from her face. Embarrassed and chuckling, she joked that we needed to try meeting each other without her crying. I gave her my card and couldn't stop smiling for the rest of the day.

We spent that entire summer together, and it was the happiest I had ever been. Then, try as I did to ignore it, the leaves eventually started to turn red, gliding to the ground as cold winds ripped them off their branches. Fall came, and Karen moved back to Iceland. It would be four years before I saw her again, and in those four years everything would change. I would enter another apartment, one where young lives had come to merciless ends. I would, in turn, take a life there, adding blindly to the ranks of the dead that would haunt me from that point on. Some would call me a hero, some a murderer. My face would be plastered across front pages of newspapers, journalists circling me like buzzards. Hearings would be held as my future was decided for me while my career and life were postponed my men in suits. Then I was reinstated, my actions deemed justifiable by morality, if not the law. Justice had been served, they said. Soon enough the journalists stopped calling and knocking on my door, disappearing as fast as they descended, sensing new prey was to be had elsewhere.

Time went on.

Case closed.

It was a mercilessly cold winter day in 2008 when my phone rang and Karen came back into my life. She was planning on moving to New York for the foreseeable future and asked if I wanted to meet her for coffee. The moment I heard her voice on the other end of the line everything else melted away. I met her in a small café in Queens

we had frequented during our summer together and, for a moment, it was as if she had never left. She had read about what had happened and could tell I was not the same man she once knew. Even so, somewhere deep inside me, she saw something worth fighting for. A few months later we had moved in together and she went to work, putting me together again, piece by piece, with the promise of a new life. For the first eighteen months of our relationship it seemed as if the darkness had left me. The constant weight on my chest lifted and I could finally breathe again. I stopped drinking and for the first time in months I slept through the nights. But the darkness never truly leaves you. No matter how bright a light you shine, the dark merely retreats. It hides away in whatever murky recess it can find, and it waits, because the dark never dies.

Karen and I had been living together for almost two years when the nightmares returned. Most nights I woke up covered in sweat, screaming the names of the dead, begging for forgiveness where there was none to be had. Then they started coming to me while I was awake; half-glimpsed shapes emerging from crowds, fading from view as soon as I reached them. Cold, small hands grabbing mine, tugging softly as the city goes quiet and lost things whisper my name. Once again I began seeking sanctuary at the bottom of any bottle I could find. The pain and self-hatred at my core refused to be contained, spewing out of me in fits of anger and depression. I took my hurt out on anyone who was unfortunate enough to be caught in the path of my downward spiral, not the least of whom was the person who was trying to pull me back up. Karen stayed by my side through it all, never wavering. She put me to bed when I drank myself to sleep, and when I woke, she held me as I wept. That was how it went for another two years, my own selfishness only allowing Karen glimpses of the man she had fallen in love with. That all changed when I came home to our apartment in Queens and Karen told me, with tears in her eyes, that she was pregnant. For some time we had talked about moving to Iceland together, and the pregnancy became the final push we needed to take the leap. Karen missed Iceland and even though I had never been there, I felt a connection to it that I could not fully explain, and it had been a long time since I felt anything but unease in New York. We decided it would be a fresh start, the beginning of the life we had been promised all those years ago when we held each other for the first time. In October of 2012, after finding a place to live and filling out all the paperwork, we finally moved to the land of fire and ice, to begin anew.

Three months later, Karen was dead.

We had been arguing that night. The fight was made worse by the fact that we had spent the day shopping for the baby, our verbal sparring tainting the bright colours and happy faces adorning the children's clothes and stuffed animals around us. I was in the wrong, of course, and all I knew how to do with that was run away. I left Karen there, crying, and I walked for what seemed like hours. I had no idea where I was going, but you could plop an alcoholic in the middle of the Sahara desert and he would still find his way to a bar. The stench of stale beer and misery welcomed me like an old friend, and I drank for the first time since the journey. It took me four beers to realize I had been a callous bastard, so I snatched the phone from my pocket and called Karen. She agreed to pick me up and I tried to apologize, but she just sighed and told me we would talk when we got home.

And then my world was shattered.

* * *

I inspected my bruised fist, wincing slightly as I stretched my fingers. I reached out and opened the cabinet, snatched a bottle of pills from inside and swung the door shut. The mirror on the front of the cabinet rattled, my trembling reflection staring back at me, distorted. Even after the mirror settled I barely recognized the man staring back at me. I felt like I was peering into a funhouse mirror, a bizarre and twisted version of myself trapped within the glass. There was a time when I was considered handsome. No one was tripping over themselves to offer me a modelling job, but I did alright with women. My friends would regularly point out that it probably had more to do with the uniform than my looks, but my ego chose to ignore them. In any case, that was a long time ago. I was 36 years old, and time would soon begin to slowly chip away at me, even if I wasn't drinking myself to an early grave. Short black hair fell down my forehead, leading to dark eyebrows and grey-green eyes that had once had a spark to them. In a moment of vanity I sighed as I lightly touched the corners of my eyes, taking note of the crow's feet that had started to form. My nose was straight and slightly wider than I would have liked, and stubble covered my face in dark fuzz. I reached up and rubbed my cheek, stretching my neck and back. I turned the bottle upside down and two

tablets fell out into my hand. Without hesitation I threw them into my mouth and took a swig from a glass of whiskey that stood on the edge of the sink.

I made my way out into the living room, which barely had room for the couch and coffee table I had taken with me from our old place. It was a small, cramped apartment right in the city centre, which meant I was paying around ten times more than the apartment was actually worth. Two large windows gave me a view of the street below and, further on, the water that led to the harbour, moonlight reflected on its surface. Further still, on the other side of the ocean, was a mountain range made up of several cliffs and ridges, all otherworldly in their magnificence. Nestled at the root of the mountain was a small town, visible only when the warm glow of its homes burned hopelessly in the night. It was, I had often thought to myself, like something Karen would have painted. Back in the apartment, a lone bottle of whiskey stood on the coffee table, accompanied by a picture of Karen and me in a worn, wooden frame. The walls were white and bare, save for a single painting of a small town seen from above. If you looked closely you could see the villagers below, standing around like needles in a bright, verdant haystack. Karen had painted it during our first summer together and given it to me when it ended.

I took one last sip from my glass and put it down on the table. Stumbling further in, I entered a short corridor that led to my bedroom. I had seen cosier jail cells. The bedroom was completely empty except for a large, double bed it had taken me the better part of an hour to cram through the doorway. The pills had started to take effect, a dull haze descending upon my mind as I let myself fall onto the bed. It became harder to keep my eyes open, until the battle was lost. I could hear them now, gathering around me. They whispered to me, and I felt cold hands on my skin. I fell deeper and deeper until I was with them, among the lost.

I slept, and she came to me.

Chapter 3

I awoke to a deafening ringing in my ears and, for a moment, it felt like my head was going to explode. I buried my head in the cool side of my pillow and tried to get back to sleep, but when the fog lifted from my mind I realized it was the doorbell. Begrudgingly, I pulled myself out of bed, wincing as the sunlight bounced off the ocean surface and through my window, and stepped out into the hallway. I figured whoever was at the door was either very impatient or dying, the doorbell buzzing aggressively while I put on a black t-shirt and a pair of jeans. The cold hardwood floor chilled my bare feet as I approached the front door. It had been a long time since anyone had visited and, looking around the cluttered apartment, I found myself wondering when I last cleaned it. I decided it was just one of life's big mysteries as I swung open the door.

A woman, who looked to be in her early thirties, stood in the hallway, a slightly annoyed look on her face. She had long, brown hair that cascaded down to her shoulders and green, almond-shaped eyes, the kind that a man could get lost in. The cold outside had turned most of her face a bright red and she still shivered slightly. She wore little to no make-up, a fact that only lent an added elegance to her already alluring features. I suspected she was used to downplaying her own beauty, for whatever reason, but it was easier said than done. She was wearing a long, black coat buttoned all the way and a blue woollen scarf that hung down her back.

"Oh," she exclaimed, her eyes growing wide in surprise. "I was starting to think no one was home."

"And you decided to take your disappointment out on my doorbell?" I cleared my throat and leaned against the doorframe.

She smiled awkwardly. "Sorry, I'm very persistent."

I nodded, making no effort to mask my disinterest as I yawned. "So, which one?"

She shook her head, slightly confused. "Which...?"

"Newspaper," I added. "Which newspaper are you from?"

"Why..." she began, but I raised my hand.

“You could say I have some experience with journalists.” I reached out and put my hand on the door. “But then, I suppose you already knew that if you did your homework.”

She smiled and reached into the tan leather purse that hung from her shoulder. After a moment, she withdrew her hand, grasping a small digital recorder. “My name is María Jóhannsdóttir, and I’m a reporter from *Fréttastund*.”

She hit record and extended her arm so that the device was inches away from my face. “Mister McMorrow, do you have any comments on the video that is currently circulating of an altercation between you and a known member of Reykjavík’s criminal underworld?”

She abandoned all pretense, the veil of cordiality dropping from her like a shawl. A fire now burned in her eyes, a fire I had seen in the eyes of many men and women before, as they poked and prodded me with questions that had no right answers.

I raised myself off the doorframe. “How about ‘no comment’? Will that get me on the front page?”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Mr. McMorrow.” She smiled condescendingly. “Your story is closer to the comics.”

“Ouch.” I feigned heartbreak. “I’m sure you can make something up, Ms. Jóhannsdóttir.”

She tilted her head, making no effort to hide her annoyance.

“I’m just giving you the chance to share your side of the story. According to the guys who made the tape, you were quite the hero.” Her hand was still outstretched, wielding the recorder like a weapon.

“There is no story, Ms. Jóhanns...” I began, before she cut me off.

“Others are calling you a dangerous vigilante, putting yourself above the law and handing out justice as you see fit.” She paused for a moment. “Then again, that is your thing isn’t it?”

We stood in silence for a moment. I could have sliced the tension in the air with a butter knife.

“Like you said, I did my homework.” She finally lowered her hand and shoved the device into her purse. She rummaged through the handbag before producing a small

piece of paper, which she handed to me. “Here’s my card. Give me a call if you want to set the record straight, vigilante.” She smiled.

I took the card and inspected it for a second before folding it and putting it in my back pocket. “If I ever get tired of my aura of mystery, I’ll be sure to call.” I said, already retreating back into the apartment.

She nodded, still smiling, before taking off down the corridor, her scarf trailing behind her.

“Oh,” she called out, just before I closed the door. I stepped out into the hallway and saw her press a button inside the elevator. “You can bill me for the doorbell.” She waved as the thick metal door slid shut and then she was gone.

* * *

I had been lying in bed for twenty minutes, trying to get back to sleep, when the alarm went off and I remembered it was Friday. With a heavy sigh I got out of bed and jumped in the shower. Scalding water washed over me and, with closed eyes, I breathed in the steam, making an honest attempt to will away my hangover. Once I realized I would have no such luck, I jumped out and got dressed, making myself at least halfway presentable for my weekly meeting.

Friðrik Kjartansson, or Frikki if he liked you enough, was Karen’s father. Karen’s mother died when she was young and her father, a policeman, did his best to raise her, but his job made it hard for him to make time for his daughter. Karen never held it against him, however, as she knew that her father wanted nothing more than to provide for her. The two shared a deep bond of love and trust, one that had grown even stronger and more profound through years of hardships. When Karen and I had lived in New York, she and her father had talked at least once a week, each call lasting at least an hour and covering everything that had happened since they last spoke. Frikki had visited us twice in the States and both times I had been nervous before he arrived. Karen’s father was a big man, powerfully built and intensely menacing when he wanted to be. The first time I met him he had almost crushed my hand when he shook it, and I figured it was as close to meeting an actual Viking as I was likely to come. But underneath the rough exterior was a kind soul, one that would do anything to make his

daughter happy. He saw the same in me, he had told me during his second visit to New York, and that was enough to override any paternal dislike he may or may not have initially harboured towards me. A year before Karen and I moved to Iceland, Frikki had retired. He was not a man used to having nothing to do, so retirement did not sit well with him. Karen worried about him, insisting that he get a hobby or start dating again, often telling her father that she did not want him dying of boredom before he ever met his grandchild.

I met Frikki for coffee every week, neither of us missing our weekly appointments mainly due to the fact that neither of us had anything else to do. A friend of Karen's had gotten me a job in construction, but business was painfully slow during the winter time and there was rarely any need for extra hands. Whatever work I took was for my own sanity more so than any need for a paycheck, as the money from Karen's art was more than enough for me to live comfortably for quite some time.

I arrived at the café in the late afternoon, the sun setting in a quickly dimming sky, and sat watching people pass by the window. Men and women with cell phones attached to their ears wove through groups of tourists huddled in front of shop windows, all of them trying their best to fight off the cold clawing at their bones. I reached over to the booth behind me and grabbed a copy of *Fréttastund* someone had left behind. I absent-mindedly flipped through the pages, only understanding a word here and there. I stopped when I saw kind, familiar eyes looking up at me from the paper. It was a face I had seen many times before in recent months; a professor had been killed during a burglary gone wrong, brutally stabbed as his home was emptied of valuables. The population of Iceland was roughly 300,000, with around half of them living in Reykjavík. It was a small country by any standard and, coupled with strict gun control, murder was extremely rare. As such, the media had covered the professor's death until there was nothing left to write about, and then kept writing. It was a small piece, most likely an update saying there were no updates, headed by the same photo of the professor used each time, along with the cover to one of his books. A symbol adorned the book, which I recognized it as a circular version of Iceland's coat of arms. The Icelandic flag stood front and centre, surrounded by four giant beasts; a giant clasping a spear, an eagle with its wings spread, a massive bull preparing to charge, and a vicious dragon spewing fire from its snout. They were the land wights; four mythical and powerful

beings that protected Iceland from any and all attackers. I absent-mindedly stared at the image, trying to remember the story Karen had told me of them, but a discomfort in my stomach made it hard to think. I looked up to see if there was a waitress nearby, deciding that Frikki would have to forgive me ordering my food before he arrived. I finally caught the attention of a passing waitress, who dutifully took down my order and disappeared into the kitchen. My stomach rumbled before settling, the promise of food that was not microwaved no doubt appealing, and the discomfort faded. A few moments later, I heard the door swing open and looked up to see Frikki examining the various booths before spotting me.

His daughter's death had almost killed him, and her absence from this world followed him like a sickness. He had always been tall and strong, carrying himself with purpose and pride. He walked towards my booth slightly hunched, as if his pain had been manifested as a weight hanging from his neck. His already grey hair had begun thinning, Frikki himself joking that he should just shave it all off before it became any more obvious. He no longer had a beard, and his eyes had become sunken ghosts of their former selves. I had a hard time remembering him without a smile on his face, but after Karen's death a smile would have seemed unnatural on him, like clothes that don't fit.

"Hey, Mike." He extended his hand and I took it in mine. I subconsciously prepared for his grip, but this, too, had become weaker.

"Frikki." I gestured to the seat opposite me and he squeezed his large frame into it, the bench creaking in protest.

"How have you been?" He smiled, grabbed a menu sitting on the table and flicked through it. "Have you ordered?"

"I'm alright," I sighed. "And yeah, same as usual, a minute ago. How are you?"

He dropped the menu on the table and his smile faded. "Well, you know."

I nodded. "Yeah, I know."

There was a look in his eyes. It was a look I had first seen during Karen's funeral, and one I would sometimes catch glimpses of during our weekly talks. It made me feel as if deep down, in his heart, he blamed me for his daughter's death. He had

never so much as hinted at it to me, but it was there. Of course, I did not hold it against him as I felt the same way.

“So, anything new?” he asked, his fingers interlocking over his belly.

I shook my head, taking another look outside the window. The street was empty.

“You are a shitty liar, Mike.” Frikki chuckled.

I looked back at him quizzically.

“You mean to tell me there’s not a video of you assaulting a man twice your size making the rounds online?”

“Ah.” I nodded, my fingers tapping the wood of the table. “I heard about that.”

The expression on Frikki’s face grew serious and he leaned forward. “Mike, is there something you want to tell me? Are you in trouble?”

I smiled assuredly. “Frikki, I’m fine. I just had a bad day and I took it out on a bad guy. That’s it.”

Frikki looked me in the eyes, and I guessed he was deciding if he believed me or not. He finally nodded. “Yeah, I saw the video. Most of the low-lives I arrested back in the day could have used a thrashing like that.”

A young woman with a blue streak in her black hair and a nose ring approached the table with a large cup of coffee in each hand. She placed them on the table and pushed them towards us, asking if she could get us anything else. She was obviously hoping we would say no, and we obliged. Frikki and I came here for the coffee not the service, which was just as well since the waiters made you feel like they would step over your corpse for free gum.

We sat in silence for a few moments and I could tell there was something on Frikki’s mind. His gaze was fixed on the window but did not travel beyond the glass. His fingers worriedly tapped his coffee cup, and even though Frikki was not the most talkative person I had ever met, I knew something was wrong.

“Frikki.” I leaned in but got no response. I repeated his name and he seemed to snap out of whatever trance he was in. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah...” he said, shaking his head. It was about as convincing as a politician’s speech.

“And I’m the shitty liar.” I put my cup down and folded my arms, raising an eyebrow.

Frikki said nothing for a while, staring down into his own cup, steam rising from it and dissipating between us.

“Do you remember Halla?” he asked, the worry now coming off him in waves.

Halla was Frikki’s sister, whom I had met a couple of times before. It was the week Karen and I had moved to Iceland, and she had brought us a box of baby clothes her own children had used. She had a daughter and a son and decided to bring us both of their clothes since we would be able to use at least half of them. I only talked to her for a few minutes, as her English wasn’t that good, but she struck me as being a kind woman. I next saw her at Karen’s funeral, but I didn’t talk to anyone that day.

“Her daughter Ásta is missing.” Frikki slid his cup away, as if the smell of it made him sick. Ásta had been with her mother when she delivered the baby clothes but, being seventeen years old at the time, was not entirely happy about the situation. I had not talked to her; like most teenagers she was functionally mute, but she seemed like a good kid.

I sat quietly and let Frikki continue.

“She’s been gone for a couple of days. Left nothing, no note, just didn’t come home from school.”

“And the police?” I asked.

Frikki shook his head, a mix of frustration and desperation. “She just turned eighteen, so she has to be missing for six days before the police start looking for her.”

I looked out the window and saw a man curse the cold as he buttoned his coat, the last glimpses of the sun visible on the horizon. My mind wandered to Ásta’s son, Siggi. He was a few years older than his sister and had chosen a road in life that could charitably be described as a “dead end”. I had met him only once; a meeting that had ended in me giving him a black eye. I looked back to Frikki.

“What about her brother?”

Frikki shook his head and raised his hand as if to wave the notion away.

“That boy is an idiot but he wouldn’t do anything to put his sister in danger.”

Frikki explained, and I believed him.

A couple of weeks before Karen's death, Siggi had knocked on our door in the middle of the night and asked for money. He needed to pay back some bikers and when asking us nicely didn't help, had threatened to beat me. "Threat" may be too generous a word, as he was about as threatening as a comatose kindergartner, but he took a swing at me when I tried to push him out the door. All in all, that night had not ended well for him.

"Listen," Frikki began, a pleading in his voice. "I know this is the sort of thing you did back in New York." I shook my head, but Frikki continued. "Please, Mike. She's a good kid, she wouldn't just take off like this."

The sun had set now, and the cold dark blanketed the city.

"I can't lose any more family, Mike." Frikki stated bluntly, and I saw him for the broken man he had become, the pain he had endured etched in his face. It seemed everywhere I went, lost children followed me.

"I'll talk to Halla tomorrow." I reached out and put my hand on Frikki's.

Frikki pulled a napkin from a metal dispenser by the window, produced a pen from his pocket and scribbled an address on it. "This is her address. Thank you, Mike."

"We'll find her, Frikki," I said, a promise I had made countless times before, never knowing if I would be able to keep it, and in return I saw in him a hope and trust I never felt I deserved until I had.

* * *

After my meeting with Frikki my stomach was still rumbling, so I decided to stop off at a hot dog stand I frequented near the harbour. Like most hot dog stands I had ever seen this one claimed to be the best, although not many others had gone the extra mile of putting it in their name. Not that I was one to argue; I had spent more money at Best in Town than I cared to admit. There was always a line of at least five people whenever I stopped by, many of them tourists whom locals had sent here for the best fast food in town, and that was the case when I arrived. I stood in line for ten minutes listening to the couple in front of me debate the merits of Reykjavík in thick, Scottish accents. A cold blast of wind hit me square in the chest and I shuddered, pushing my

hands further into the pockets of my jacket. I finally reached the front of the line and a friendly smile awaited me.

“Hey, Mikey! Same as usual?” The woman had turned before I could answer and began putting together my usual order of two hot dogs with the works.

Her name was Lóa and she, along with her two sons, had been running the stand for longer than she could remember. She was in her sixties now and, having lost her husband several years before, had put all of her love and most of her time into the stand. She had become somewhat of a figure in downtown Reykjavík, and you would have a hard time finding someone who did not know her name, or enjoyed her friendliness.

“Same as usual, Lóa.” I smiled.

Lóa had made it a point to get to know me once I became a regular, and I was thankful for the company. When business was slow, which it rarely was, we would talk while I ate and she would offer me free refills of soda. This time there was a line of about ten people behind me so I enjoyed my hot dogs in silence and, with a wave and a smile to Lóa, was on my way.

On my way back to the apartment I decided to walk up Laugavegur, the main shopping street, instead of my usual route along the water. It was still early in the evening, so the streets were littered with tourists braving the cold in search for a place to eat. As night would fall, the visitors would retreat to the safety of their hotel rooms as the natives swarmed the city centre, drunkenly shuffling between night clubs in search for one conquest or another. I glanced through the countless windows I passed, warm light spilling out onto the street, and glimpsed at the people inside. They ate and drank together, sharing laughter and intimacy. It felt foreign to me, and not just because I did not understand their language. My mind wandered to Ásta. It was not rare for teenagers in search for a thrill to get mixed up with a bad crowd. Her brother, Siggi, had done it, and all she had to do to get lost was follow his footsteps. If that was the case, she would most likely turn up within a few days, scared straight. Of course, that was most likely what the police had told Ásta’s mother when they explained why they would not help her find her daughter. I felt a strange sense of obligation pulling at me. Before Karen I had been alone, and regardless of how many times I had met them, Halla and her children were, however briefly, my family.

It was likely, I thought, that the city had swallowed the young woman up and would spit her out when it was done with her, because that was what cities did. In any case, I would speak to Halla in the morning and do my best to bring her daughter home.

I must have been too focused on my new case, if that was what it was, as I did not see the man walking towards me. My shoulder bumped into his as we passed each other and I was knocked slightly to the side.

“Sorry,” I said, absent-minded, and continued my gait.

“Michael?” the man called out, and something about the way he said my name rubbed me the wrong way.

I turned around and looked at him. He was average height, slightly shorter than I was. The moonlight bounced off his bald head as he took a few steps towards me and reached out his hand. Hesitant, I reached out and shook it. He was thin, almost skeletal, but he was deceptively strong. I cursed internally as I felt the joints of one of my fingers pop in his vicelike grip. His hands were clammy, and I tried to be subtle about wiping my palm on the leg of my pants when he let go.

“Michael McMorro?” he asked again. He looked to be a bit older than me, probably in his late thirties or early forties. His nose was thin and crooked, as if it had been broken more than once, and the skin around it was extremely dry; flakes of dead skin clung hopelessly to his face and fell to the ground like snow when we shook hands. He was smiling, and I could see yellowing teeth behind his lips, stained by years of smoking. I could taste the tobacco in the air around him, like an invisible aura of smog clung to him. But beneath it I could smell something else; a faint, but sweet, scent that I could not place.

“Yes?” I asked, hesitant. “Do I know you?”

At first I thought he might be another journalist, but his slender fingers delved into the pockets of his pants, without retrieving a recorder or a pad. That was when the absurdity of his clothing hit me. He was wearing only black dress pants and a white shirt, the pants tucked into heavy, brown workman’s boots. Both the pants and shirt were too large to fit him comfortably, draped over his delicate frame like a blanket. He looked somewhat like a malnourished child on its way to a wedding, wearing his father’s hand-me-downs.

“Oh, no, no. We have never met.” He shook his hands, his eyes locked onto mine. “But I knew your wife.”

I knew it was silly, but every time someone mentioned Karen after she passed, I got a sort of rush through my stomach. For someone else to say her name, to acknowledge her existence, was proof, somehow, that she had been real; that I had not dreamed her into being. But when this man spoke of her, I felt nothing.

“Oh.” I nodded, my guard going down in spite of myself. “Nice to meet you...?”

Karen had always had more friends than I managed to keep count of, interrupting most of the stories she told me for clarification of which one of them she was talking about. It had become a common occurrence in the months following her death for someone to stop me in the street and offer their condolences, and I appreciated them for it.

“Elías, my name is Elías.”

For the first time I truly noticed his eyes, and how impossibly dark they were. His pupils were large and black, and I thought of twisting things that devoured stars.

“Elías...” I repeated his name, searching my memory. “I’m sorry, I don’t remember Karen mentioning you.”

“Oh.” He chuckled to himself. “I knew Karen a long, long time ago. It feels like another life, sometimes.”

I noticed something else in the way he spoke; he had a subtle lisp, a noise like gas escaping from a balloon as he talked. It seemed to get even colder, and my teeth began chattering. I stood there, shivering, and wondered how on earth this man seemed so unfazed by the cold.

“I was quite sorry to miss the funeral.”

“Thank you.” I gave a weak smile.

“Can you believe this?” He motioned to an empty lot on the other side of the street. Whatever building had once stood there had been reduced to rubble, and large cranes erected in its place. A small excavator stood empty beside a large heap of dirt, waiting for its work to resume in the morning. “Everywhere you go, they are knocking down houses and building hotels.”

“Yeah, well, tourists have to sleep somewhere, I guess.” I shrugged, eager to continue on my way. “I actually have to get going.”

I spoke, but it was as if he didn’t hear me. He stared at the lot, at the work equipment, with something approaching genuine anger. Finally he turned back to me with a smile on his face. “Of course,” he said, once again exposing his stained, decaying teeth. “You take care of yourself, Michael.”

He turned and walked down the street and, for some reason, I stood there and watched him until he took a left turn into an alleyway, disappearing from view. The stench of tobacco hung around me now, and I decided I would clean my clothes as soon as I got back to the apartment. I felt a slight, sharp pain in my stomach; as good as those hot dogs were they had never been on the best of terms with my digestive system. My hands felt hot and damp, but I ignored it and walked on.

Chapter 4

This is how it always starts.

I open my eyes to a bright light, and I have no idea where I am or how I got here. Gradually, through a heavy blur, my vision returns to me and I am greeted by white. All around me, stretching into eternity, there is snow. The pristine whiteness of it is almost blinding. My limbs are heavy, as if I am anchored in place, but I take a step forward and hear the soft crunch underneath my foot. I look up and there is nothing; a pitch black void hovering over me, threatening to come crashing down. There are no stars here, for this is where the dark resides, and it has devoured them all.

At first, I am alone, but she always comes.

She stands so close to me. I want to reach out and touch her, but I can no longer move. Thick, blonde hair covers her face, but I can see her eyes. She is staring at me. Into me. Her pale skin and white night gown almost render her invisible in the snow. She has become a wraith, lingering in the divide between worlds. She moves, her hand slowly gliding upwards, and I brace myself for her touch, the feel of her skin. But she always stops, pausing for a moment as if there is something she is only now beginning to understand.

I say her name, but the dark devours that, too.

She withdraws her hand, her fingers now tracing her abdomen. Before my eyes, her stomach swells with the life we had created. I hear laughter; a small, weak thing echoing in the black. Then, I hear her weep. I am screaming her name now, but she cannot hear me. Suddenly, silently, a pool of blood begins to soak through her gown. It is a dark, ugly thing growing like a tumor on fast forward. Crimson droplets fall to the ground, my eyes following them as the snow absorbs them greedily and turns to a gory slush.

The voices come now. Disembodied cries slither in the dark, wrapping themselves around me. The snow beneath my feet shifts, and small, grey hands rise up from the ground like decrepit plants. They hold onto me, barely reaching across my foot, but this is their realm, and here they are strong. Their fingers latch onto me, digging into me, and I can feel their fear, their sorrow, their anger.

“What do you want?” I ask them. Their answer is always the same.

Suddenly I hear my name. I look up, and she is closer now, closer than she has ever been in here. I can feel strands of her hair on my face, and the scent of her pervades me. Her lips move, but I cannot hear her. She is crying now, and I feel something move behind me. Something big, something incomprehensibly dark, is coming. The ground shakes as it approaches me from the back, but dead hands keep me from moving, from seeing.

The beast stops, and I can feel its sweltering breath on me. Karen reaches out and touches my face. I will join them soon. She closes her eyes, and the leviathan draws breath. For a moment, everything is still.

I shut my eyes, and I am consumed by fire.

* * *

I awoke, delirious, in a pool of my own sweat. My heart was pounding so hard it felt as if it would burst through my chest. I sat for a moment, my breathing heavy, as I rubbed the sweat from my eyes. I moved to the end of the bed, the soles of my feet touching down on the cold floor as I glanced out the window. The moon seemed impossibly large in the night sky, its eerie glow illuminating the entire room. I reached out to the edge of the bed, pulling one corner of the sheet off and wiping my face with it. I sighed, the beating of my heart finally slowing down, and stood up. I vaguely remembered a half-empty glass of scotch in the living room, and figured that and a couple of sleeping pills would be enough to get me through the night.

I stepped out into the hallway, dragging the palm of my hand along the wall and feeling its bumps and ridges. The apartment was silent, but then it always was. I had become accustomed to the silence like a whale would the parasites slowly leeching the life from it. A dull ache began at my temples and gradually spread through my head. I stepped into the living room, my eyes closed as I rubbed my forehead. Suddenly, I stepped on something wet and slipped. My arm instinctively shot out and I caught myself, bracing against the corner. I looked down at the large, dark smudge on the floor. It took me a moment to realize what I was looking at, and by that time it was too late.

Leading from my front door and covering the majority of the living room floor were muddy footprints.

I spun quickly, my mind racing, as I immediately thought of the baseball bat beneath my bed. The moment I turned, I heard them behind me. Heavy footsteps pursued me, and I had only made it halfway to my bedroom when something metallic connected with my lower back. A surge of pain shot through my body, and I let out a scream as I collapsed into a heap. I laid there, the hardwood floor cold against my cheek, my head swimming. My ears were ringing, but I could hear them laughing. Large hands took hold of my ankles and I was dragged along the floor, back into the living room. I groaned as I was grabbed by the shoulder and rolled onto my back. I opened my eyes and saw three great shadows hovering over me, and I could smell their hunger; a hateful thing hiding beneath cheap cologne and the stench of cigarettes. My eyes finally adjusted to the dark and the men came into focus. Before I could make out their faces, however, one of them kicked me hard in the ribs. I clutched my side in agony and squirmed on the floor, and in that moment I caught a glimpse of their t-shirts. They were all adorned with a large skull with sharp blades for teeth.

“You are not so fucking tough now!” the man who kicked me spat, as the others chuckled in cruel, pitiless grunts.

One of the men reached down and grabbed me underneath the arms, hoisting me upwards. He carried my limp body to the middle of the floor, one of his friends hurling the coffee table into the corner of the living room. He put me down on my knees, and the moment he let me go I fell forward, my hands barely keeping me upright. I stared at the floor, trying to overcome the pain coursing through my torso, when one of them grabbed a handful of my hair. I winced in agony as he pulled my head back and I was brought face to face with a man I had met before.

“Do you remember me, American?” The man whose nose I had broken was inches away from my face, and I could feel his stinking breath on my skin. His nose was swollen to at least double its size, and the skin around both his eyes had darkened with blood from ruptured vessels. He closed his free hand into a fist, his massive hand the size of a boulder. “Let me remind you.”

He hit me in the jaw like a speeding train, and I felt as if the entire lower half of my face would tear off. I flew onto my side, hitting the floor with a dull thud. I

coughed and stream of blood fell from my mouth. Before I had time to even register the pain, I was raised to my knees again.

“My friends and I are going to show you what happens when you mess with Hell Riders.” He roared as he punched me again, this time in the stomach.

I doubled over in pain, but the two men behind me quickly grabbed me by both arms and raised me up once again. Blood trickled down my chin and I felt like I had to vomit. The man was pacing the floor, absent-mindedly scratching at his beard as he knocked over glasses, bottles and anything else that was not bolted down. I looked up at Karen’s painting on the wall to my left, hoping that it would escape their attention. I cursed silently as the ringleader noticed my glance, and moved towards the wall.

“Well,” he said, putting a mock-British accent. “isn’t this a lovely piece of shit.”

He stalked closer to the painting and reached into his pocket. He withdrew a knife, the same knife he had pulled on me the night we first met, and the blade popped out with a quick, loud snap. I immediately began trying to shake the two thugs off me, but they didn’t budge.

“You touch that painting and I swear to God I will kill you.” I growled through clenched teeth.

A silence fell over the room, and I felt the two men restraining me tense up, their fingers digging into my biceps.

“What...” the knife-wielding thug turned, and he seemed genuinely perplexed at my outburst. I figured he was not used to receiving threats from people in my situation. His surprise was quickly replaced with anger, and I could see the rage in his eyes. “What the *fuck* did you say?!”

He lowered the knife to his side, but his other arm reached to his back and, in one quick motion, he produced a gun. The wooden handle disappeared in his grip and the short, silver barrel shone in the moonlight. I recognized it as a .38 calibre Smith and Wesson revolver. It was easy to hide due to its small size and, as a result, was a popular gun among smugglers and criminals. Some men made the mistake of underestimating the .38 calibre, but they usually found out the hard way that a small gun ends a life just as fast as any other. The importing, selling and owning of a handgun was illegal in Iceland, but I figured my three visitors were not especially concerned.

He pressed the cool barrel against my forehead, and I stared up at him. I had had guns pointed at me before, and each time I could almost feel the bullet in the chamber, like a hungry animal begging to be released from its leash. I had prayed, in those moments. This time, I did not.

“Do it.” I whispered, my eyes unblinking.

“What?” He tilted his head slightly.

“DO IT!” I roared, blood and spittle shooting from my mouth.

Once again, there was silence. Our eyes were locked, and I could sense his finger begin to tighten around the trigger. I was ready.

Suddenly the silence was broken by one of the men behind me. He said something in Icelandic, and even though I could not understand the words, I had talked enough men out of pulling a trigger to recognize the tone in his voice. Still my eyes were locked with the gunman’s, and I could see him steeling himself, preparing to take a life. His friend continued to speak, but it was only when I heard a name, a name that sounded oddly familiar, that the gunman’s eyes flickered: Ari Gunnar.

The gun wavered slightly, until it lowered completely. Blood from my head rushed to the spot where the barrel had pressed against my flesh, and only then did I realize I had not been breathing. I let out a deep sigh and my head dropped.

“You...” the gunman began, hesitant. “You are a lucky piece of *shit*.”

He gripped the barrel of the gun in his other hand before raising it above his head. He swung the weapon hard, the wooden barrel flying towards my head.

And then everything went black.

* * *

I woke up, sprawled on the floor, several hours later. The sun had risen and shone an oppressively bright light on the apartment. My whole body ached and I could barely move, but I slowly crawled towards the couch. My clothes were covered in blood, sweat and mud, and the entire apartment looked as if a hurricane had decided to reorganize it. I pulled myself up onto the couch and sat for a few minutes, gently touching the cuts on my face. I caressed my side and flinched. I suspected at least two of my ribs were fractured, if not broken.

There are certain things you learn as a policeman. You learn to recognize the way a man carries himself when he has a concealed weapon underneath his coat. You learn to read the facial tics of a suspect who thinks he is pulling one over on you. And you learn that when a criminal is the victim of an attack, it never stops there. After Inspector Ólafur told me the man I had assaulted was a known gang member, I knew it was only a matter of time before he and his colleagues hunted me down. Reykjavík was a small city, and coupled with the video footage of our previous encounter, I also knew it would not take him long to find me. I had not expected the gun, however, nor had I expected my reaction to it.

I pushed the previous night to the back of my mind and, once I was sure I would not pass out, stood up. Stepping over broken glass and splatters of mud, I limped to the bathroom. I inspected my face in the mirror – my lower lip had split almost down the middle, swelling considerably. There was a large cut above my right eye, where he had struck me with the pistol, and my cheek had begun to bruise. My entire face was sore to the touch, and I rummaged through the cabinet for painkillers. There was only one pill left, which I swallowed hastily before stripping down and stepping into the shower. I turned the water up as hot as I could take it, and I lost track of time as I stood there, letting it rain down on my face.

I thought of the nightmares coiled beneath my pillow; of dead hands and black voids, and of a great, colossal beast I could not see.

Yet.

Chapter 5

By the time I stumbled out of my apartment it was late afternoon, and the sun had already begun to make its escape, lazily descending into the horizon as the winds grew cold and merciless. I thought about getting a check-up at the hospital, but I have never been one for common sense. I decided I would keep my appointment with Frikki's sister, so I cautiously put on my leather jacket and headed out into the city. What would usually have been a five-minute walk to the nearest pharmacy turned into a fifteen minute duck and weave through the hordes of enthusiastic tourists, most of whom were already covered from head to toe in Icelandic wool. I ignored the sideways glances and hushed comments my shabby appearance garnered, and finally reached the pharmacy. The effects of the lone pill I had ingested earlier that day had begun to peter out, the sharp pain in my torso making its presence felt once again. After a ten-minute queue I had finally purchased a fresh box of painkillers and, a few seconds later, hungrily swallowed three of them. I leaned up against a wall outside, staring up at the sky as I waited for the medication to kick in. I could still feel the cold metal pressed against my forehead, my life's end lurking in its gaping maw. Slowly, the agonizing pain turned to a dull ache, and I pushed myself off the wall and back towards my apartment.

I took the staircase down into the garage; a large, open area underneath the building itself, housing the cars of the buildings' inhabitants. My car was nestled in between two almost identical Volkswagen vehicles, whose owners not only shared a taste in automobiles, but also a stunning lack of spatial awareness. I squeezed past the Volkswagen on the driver's side of my car and tried my best to open the door without slamming it into my neighbour. I finally threw myself into the cool leather of the driver's seat, wincing as a sharp pain ran through my ribs. The car was a 1972 Chevy Nova SS, and I had fallen in love with it the moment I saw the shine of its gun-metal grey body. It had been my father's, and I had spent hours with him as a boy, in our home in Queens, watching him affectionately tinker with the engine. A few days before the cancer claimed him, my father had handed me the keys and asked me to take good care of it. The Chevy was one of the few things I could not bear to leave behind when I came to Iceland so, despite the astronomical cost, Karen and I had had it shipped north

with us. I rarely drove it anymore, as the bars I frequented were within walking distance of my apartment, but I still took it out once in a while. With a soft jangle, I jammed the keys into the ignition and twisted, the engine roaring to life as the entire car shook with the vibration of the engine. Carefully, I steered the car out of its spot and exited the garage.

Halla lived with her children in Garðabær, an upper-class suburb about a twenty-minute drive from the city. She was a respected attorney, activist and noted feminist, often appearing as an expert opinion on talk shows and in newspapers. Karen had once told me she felt the media only brought her aunt in when they wanted a show, as Halla was a controversial figure and where she appeared, comments sections were flooded with the ignorant and anonymous. Halla's ex-husband had left her several years before and moved to Norway with another woman, relegating his role as a father to sending money on his children's birthdays. Whenever he remembered them, anyway. With help from a website called *Já*, a mix between an online phone book and the Icelandic equivalent of Google Maps, I eventually found the house and parked the car in the driveway. I had used *Já* extensively when I first arrived in Iceland, its directions saving me from getting lost on several occasions.

Halla's home was a white, two-storied building on a street with nothing but white, two-storied buildings; the entire neighbourhood looked like something out of an insurance commercial. I approached the front door, quickly scanning the plaque above the doorbell for the inhabitants' names. Once I was sure I was at the right place, I pressed a slightly faded, golden knob and a loud buzz echoed through the house.

A few seconds later I heard footsteps and the door swung open. Halla carried herself with the same dignity as her brother had always done. At only 5' 3", there was also a vulnerability and gracefulness that Frikki, admittedly, lacked. She wore black yoga pants and a blue t-shirt that was two sizes too big, underneath a large robe that reached the floor. She wore no makeup and her blonde hair hung loose around her shoulders. The bags around her eyes made it obvious that she had slept very little, if at all, and I could tell she had been nervously biting at her lips. It was a far cry from the strong, confident woman I had met and seen on television. The disappearance of your child has a decaying effect on your being; I had seen it many times before.

Halla stepped out towards me and immediately wrapped her arms around my shoulders, burying her face in my chest.

“Oh, Mike.” Her body heaved against mine. “Thank you so much for coming.”

I put my arms around her and hugged her tight. “Of course, Halla.”

She squeezed my body even tighter as she sobbed, and I winced as pain began at my ribs and shot throughout my torso. I flinched despite myself and Halla let go, moving away so she could get a look at me. She gasped loudly as she finally noticed the cuts and bruises on my face, instinctively reaching out to examine them.

“Oh, my God.” Her hand stopped inches from my face. “What in the world happened to you?”

I smiled and shook my head. “It’s nothing, I’m okay.”

Halla let out a chuckle that was caught somewhere between being disbelief and maternal annoyance. “I’ve seen ‘okay’ and that is not what it looks like.”

She took a step backwards into the house and held the door open. She gestured for me to come in, and I obliged, stepping into the warmth of her home. The interior was considerably more distinct than the exterior would have suggested. Halla led me through a long corridor that had several sculptures of reindeer, big and small, on wooden stands propped against the walls. There were numerous paintings on display, most of which were too abstract for my own taste. We took a left at the end of the hallway and entered the living room; a bright, wide open space filled with even more art that I figured I was too uncultured to understand. Halla pointed me towards a large, brown leather couch and took a seat on its smaller companion piece opposite me.

“Can I get you anything? Coffee?” Halla asked, gesturing towards her own steaming cup on the glass table between us.

I raised a hand and smiled. “No, no, I’m good.”

My eyes wandered to a painting hanging on the wall behind Halla, its ornate, golden frame suspended just above the fireplace. A large, majestic eagle soared, its wings almost reaching from one end of the image to the other. The sun itself was not seen, but its warm, comforting presence was felt in the golden rays that penetrated the clouds around the bird. The blue of the sky was so vivid I felt as if I could swim in it. The painting was beautiful and I felt a familiar sense of freedom at the edges of my mind.

Halla noticed my gaze and smiled, sorrow etched on her face.

“She gave us that painting a few weeks before she moved to America.” She let out a deep, mournful sigh. “Sometimes I look at it and think I should call her, see how she’s doing.”

I nodded. “I know what you mean.”

“How are you, Mike?”

“Some days are alright.” I looked down, and I saw my reflection in the glass. “Most days aren’t.”

For a moment neither of us talked, and the burden of our loss filled the room. I finally shook my head slightly, as if to shake her absence from my mind. This was a case, and the only way I would be of any use to Ásta was if I kept my head on straight and treated it like one.

“So...Ásta went missing a few days ago?” I leaned forward, my fingers interlocking and determination in my voice.

Halla shifted in her seat, nervously fidgeting with the edge of the table. The sorrow she had felt moments ago was replaced with a sickening sense of worry and fear, the uncertainty of her daughter’s whereabouts keeping a stranglehold on her.

“Three days ago.” She nodded, composing herself. “She just...she didn’t come home from school. I tried calling, but her phone was turned off. I called everyone, nobody had heard from her.”

Tears began to stream down her face. “I don’t know what to do, Mike.”

“Listen...” I began, slipping into my rigid detective’s voice like an old pair of shoes. “Listen to me, Halla.”

Halla stifled her sobs with some effort, produced a crumpled piece of tissue from the pocket of her robe and blew her nose. She finally looked up, her eyes red and hurting.

“I am going to do my absolute best to find your daughter, but I need you to focus.” I never broke eye contact as I spoke. People trusted you more if you looked them in the eyes, and you never needed their trust more than when their children’s lives were in your hands. All the old tricks were coming back to me.

Halla nodded, reached for her coffee and took a sip. She took a deep breath, held it for a moment, and then exhaled, her lower lip quivering as the air rushed out of her mouth. “Okay.”

“Now, I want you to think. *Really* think.” I tapped on the glass for emphasis. “Was there anything different about Ásta before she went missing? Was she acting strange? Hanging out with new people? Anything at all out of the ordinary?”

Halla turned and looked out the window, and I could see the cogs turning in her mind. The living room was quiet for a few minutes as she stared out onto the street. Cars drove past carrying families on their way home from weekend excursions. Soon they would sit down at the dinner table, and their houses would resound with the laughter of children. Parents would tuck in their sons and daughters, and they would rest easy, knowing their kids were safe. Halla closed her eyes, shook her head in frustration and turned to me.

“No. There’s nothing,” she said, wiping the corner of her eyes with her sleeve. “She was fine. We were fine...”

“Alright. Now, can you think of anyone at all who would want to hurt you? Or Ásta?”

I knew Halla usually received several threats whenever she appeared on television; anonymous letters from cowards who hid behind the glare of their computer screens. Halla had always taken the threats seriously, alerting the police whenever a new one was left in her mailbox, or stapled to her front door. More often than not, the culprits turned out to be bored teenage boys whose idea of what it meant to be men was wildly off base. Nonetheless, I had to rule out the possibility of some psychopath deciding letters weren’t enough anymore.

“Have you gotten any letters recently that seemed different? Even if it was just a feeling?”

Halla shook her head. “No, it’s been a few weeks since I got any hate mail. I don’t know why anyone would want to hurt my baby.” She was barely holding herself together, her hands trembling as she tried to keep from breaking down.

“I need you to be strong, Halla, alright?” I tried to inject some warmth into my words, but I knew there was nothing I could say that would make her suffering go away. My next question, if anything, would only compound it.

“I’m sorry, but I need to ask you this.” I drew in a deep breath, hesitating for a moment as I tried to find the best wording. “I know your son has had some problems with drugs. How certain are you that Ásta...”

Halla immediately cut me off. “Michael, I know my daughter, and she would never do anything like that.” Her voice was laced with frustration. “That’s exactly what the police said. They said she had probably just gone off to party with her brother.”

She shook her head. “Ásta would never go down that road, not after seeing what it did to Siggi.”

I nodded, but doubt had already begun to creep its way into my head. I believed what Halla was saying. At least, I believed that she believed it. During my time in Missing Persons back home I had talked to countless parents who swore up and down their child would never so much as think about drugs. More often than not, I found those kids in various states of addiction in abandoned buildings that fed on unfulfilled futures. Most parents were blind to their children’s imperfections, and that made them unreliable in cases such as this.

“Alright, it’s okay, I believe you.” I stood up, casting a glance out the window and watching as the sun finally disappeared on the horizon and the dark took hold. “I’m going to need to talk to Ásta’s friends, anyone she spent a lot of time with.”

Halla thought for only a second or two, before pulling herself from her chair. She put her cup on the table and went to the edge of the room, where a small wooden dresser stood against the wall. She pulled open one of the drawers, grabbed a pen and piece of paper and scribbled something on it.

“Ragna. She’s Ásta’s best friend.” She walked over to me and handed me the note, where she had written the name and a phone number. “They go to the same school, and they spend most waking hours together. If something strange was going on, something I didn’t know about...” She paused, struggling with the very notion. “Then Ragna would know.”

I folded the note and put it in my pocket. “It’s getting late, but I’ll talk to her tomorrow.”

Halla nodded, sighing deeply. “I’ll call her parents and tell them.”

I put my hands on her shoulders, looking straight into her eyes. “Halla, we’ll find her. She’s going to be okay.”

She closed her eyes, forcing herself to believe what I was saying. The alternative, I knew, was not an option. “Thank you, Michael. Thank you so much.”

We hugged, and I left her there, the world growing dark around her. And out there, in the darkness, something shifted; moving between shadows, it raised its head to the wind and smelled the air. And it waited.

Chapter 6

I did not sleep that night, and the next day I was out of the house by 10 a.m. Halla had called me a few minutes before I left and told me she had contacted Ragna's parents. They had agreed to let me speak to their daughter on her lunch break, and so I sat down at a café near the clothing store where she worked, and waited. The waitress there was young and bubbly, although her enthusiasm waned considerably when she realized I did not speak Icelandic. It took her a few minutes to take down my order, and when she was sure she had gotten it right she apologized and disappeared into the kitchen. A moment later she emerged from behind the counter and brought me a cappuccino and a scone, neither of which I had ordered. Her braces sparkled as she smiled at me, and I did not have the heart to say anything. I thanked her and she scurried off to assist an elderly woman who, from what I could hear, the waitress had an even harder time understanding than she had me. I ate my scone, which turned out to be better than I had expected, and drank my coffee as I stared out the window. I did not remember the last time I had been out and about this early in the day, and I enjoyed watching the sun battling the winter dreariness, slowly climbing as high as it would go before its inevitable descent just a few hours later. I thought of Ásta, and where she could be. I hoped, of course, that she was safe. That she had merely run away from home in some daring escapade with a new boyfriend, and would return home to her mother's arms, heartbroken and wiser for it.

But there are certain things that, once you learn, can render hope obsolete. Stories and statistics passed from person to person like a disease. It turns the world a darker shade of grey, and everyone who listens has their lives made just a little bit worse. You cannot unlearn these things; knowing them becomes a part of your heart, and it is made heavy. One of these things is that, in cases of kidnappings, when a person has been missing for more than 72 hours, the odds of finding them alive become astronomical. Ásta had been missing for almost 90 hours.

And so I hoped.

But I feared.

* * *

A couple of minutes before noon I ducked into the store, thankful to get out of the cold. The overwhelmingly spicy stench of potpourri hit me like a freight train as soon as I entered the building, and my eyes watered. It was boutique catering to young women, although their selection of clothes and the pink wallpaper, along with the smell of the place, made it seem like their clientele consisted mostly of Disney princesses. Sticking out like a sore thumb, I made my way past rack after rack of dresses and skirts until I finally reached the counter, behind which a young girl stood assisting a woman and her daughter. The cashier, who I assumed was Ragna, cast a nervous glance at me as she finished up with her customers. The customer finally turned, bag in hand, and sighed audibly when she noticed me. She not-so-subtly grabbed her daughter's arm and led her past me, all but running out of the building. I could almost feel the store's stock dropping with every second I spent inside.

"Hi," I approached the desk. "Ragna?"

The girl, fresh-faced and visibly tense, turned to me and nodded, brushing a lock of raven hair from her face and folding her arms.

"My name is Michael, I'm here to talk to you about your friend, Ásta."

I made an effort to lighten the tone of my voice and smiled, although I figured the cuts and bruises on my face undermined my efforts to appear nice and approachable.

Ragna walked over to a door leading into a backroom, peered inside and called something out in Icelandic. A few seconds later, another girl slinked out, wiping crumbs from the corners of her mouth before taking Ragna's place at the counter.

"I only get fifteen minutes for lunch, so..." Ragna stated bluntly, leading me through the door and into the staff area. It was a cramped space, with plastic furniture and stacks of used magazines almost as tall as me. I quickly scanned some of the covers and figured they were probably as old as me, too. Ragna swung open the door to a small refrigerator and reached in, producing a small plate of salad. She ripped the plastic off, grabbed a fork from a nearby drawer and took a seat. Without saying a word she began picking at her food, and I sensed I was not to be the highlight of her day. I sat down in a tiny chair opposite her and, after a short balancing act, finally broke the silence.

"So, Ragna, you've known Ásta for a long time, right?"

She shrugged, her eyes buried in her salad. "Since we were, like, six years old or something."

“So you would notice if there was something strange going on with her?”

“I guess.” Still she looked down, and I figured if avoiding eye contact ever became an Olympic sport, Iceland had a real contender.

“Was there? Before she went missing?” I asked, but I already knew her answer.

“No.” she stated quickly. It was a rehearsed response, cloaked in a veil of nonchalance as if I had just asked her if she wanted something to drink with her meal.

I paused for a moment, watching her. She was almost unbearably nervous; she treated her salad more like landscaping than food, and her feet were restless.

“Are you sure, Ragna?”

“I don’t know anything, okay?!” she snapped, finally looking up at me with an annoyed expression. There was anger in her eyes, but beneath it, something else.

She was scared.

She went back to absent-mindedly picking at her food, and she seemed to shrink in her seat. In my experience, getting information from someone who was frightened required a great deal of care. Some people, including detectives I had worked with, thought the best way to do so was to make them more scared of you than whatever it was that was preventing them from talking. They were wrong.

“I, uh...” I cleared my throat, hesitating for a moment and looking down. “I used to be a policeman, in America.”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Ragna stop fidgeting with her salad, and reluctantly look up at me.

“And for a very long time, it was my job to find people that were missing.” I sighed. “One day, we got a call about twin brothers who had disappeared from school. Brad and Jonah. They were seven years old.

“We looked for them for a very long time. We talked to teachers, students, friends, neighbours, relatives...nobody knew anything. Nobody had seen anything; it was like they vanished off the face of the earth.” My eyes were locked on to the wall, but I was looking at something else; something long gone. “A few weeks later, a young girl walked into the police station and asked to talk to me. Turns out she was the boys’ babysitter. One night, a couple of days before they went missing, she had been watching them. She had just put them to bed when she decided to call her friends over and smoke

some weed. They went out into the backyard and this girl, the babysitter, she saw a man watching the house.

“As soon as the man saw her, he jumped into a car and drove off. She said she knew there was something wrong about him, and when the boys went missing she also believed that man had something to do with it. But she was just a kid herself; she thought if she came forward and told us the truth, she would get in trouble for the drugs. She could barely speak she was crying so hard, begging us not to arrest her.”

Ragna listened quietly, still as a statue. Memories cut through me like knives, and I shook my leg as if to channel my turmoil down into the ground.

“But she remembered the car. She even remembered the first three digits of the license plate. It took me a few hours to find the owner, and from there I got an address. I had never driven so fast in my life.” I closed my eyes, anchoring myself in the present so as not to fall into the past, for if you let yourself fall you never stop.

“I was too late.” The words burned my throat on their way out. I reached up and rubbed my eyes quickly before turning back to Ragna, tears running down her face. “What I’m saying is...if there is anything, anything at all, that you can tell me...”

I reached one hand across the plastic table. “Every second counts.”

Ragna looked away, hanging on to her composure by the skin of her teeth. For a moment, she reminded me of a house of cards, the second before it collapses. She took a deep breath and held it, and those seconds felt like an eternity. She finally exhaled and nodded, more to herself than to me.

“There was a guy...” she finally said, her voice hoarse. She breathed heavily, her eyes focused and her muscles tensed as if she was physically pulling the words out of her body. Suddenly the door to the room opened slowly and Ragna’s colleague peered inside. Her fifteen minutes were up, but I sprang to my feet.

“Just give us a moment, please,” I said as I shut the door in her face. “Thanks.”

“Okay, a guy.” I nodded enthusiastically as I sat back down and leaned in closer. “Can you tell me anything about this guy?”

“Ásta met him online, few weeks ago,” she began in broken English. “They were talking every day on Facebook, and she said to me she was in love with him.” She folded her arms and hunched slightly, as if the air had grown colder around her. “She did not tell her mom because she knew she would make her stop talking to him. She

said he was her soul mate, and she was going to go meet him. I was telling her it was a bad idea, but she did not listen to me. She said I don't understand, and she made me promise not to tell anyone."

"What was his name, Ragna, do you remember his name?"

"His name was Jón Dór...I tried looking for him on Facebook after Ásta did not come home, but his profile was gone," she explained, the tears now falling freely.

I was never the smartest man in the world, but I recognized a play on the name "John Doe" when I saw one. I was most likely looking at an online predator who had spent weeks grooming Ásta and, when he finally got what he wanted, deleted all traces of his alter ego off the Internet and crawled into whatever hole he came from.

"Ragna, this is very important, do you remember where Ásta was going to meet this Jón Dór?"

Ragna buried her face in her hands, her whole body trembling. "I don't..." she gasped, straining to take in air. "I don't know. She told it to me but I don't remember."

I quickly stood up and moved over to Ragna, putting one arm around her shoulder. "It's okay, it's okay." I repeated over and over. "You've done good."

"I-I remember..." she began, struggling to regain control of her voice. I backed away and knelt by her side, hoping there was something more. Some buried piece of information that could help me find Ásta. "I remember...we were talking on the phone, the day before she was missing. And she said to me she was going to his place...but she did not know where it was. She said to me she had to use *Já* to find it."

It was as if my mind was jumpstarted. If Ásta had used the map website to find her way to "Jón Dór's" home, then her internet history would contain the search results. I leapt to my feet, and my heart raced.

"Ragna, was she at home when you had this conversation?" I asked, my hands already in my jacket pocket, digging for the car keys.

"Y-Yes, she was at home."

"Thank you, Ragna," I put my hand on her shoulder once again and squeezed gently. "You have been a huge help."

I burst out of the store, the ice-cold wind rushing into my face, stinging my skin. Within seconds I was in my car, heading back to Halla's house. Both hands gripped the steering wheel, the leather coating cracking beneath my fingers.

I drove faster than I had in a long, long time.

* * *

The roads leading to Garðabær were clogged with Sunday drivers. I ignored the cacophony of honks and irritated screams from the other drivers as my Chevy swerved indelicately between cars. The low winter sun was blinding, and I almost crashed into a large bus as I ran a red light. Moments before, I had called Halla on her cell phone. She had decided to go back to work in order to get her mind off Ásta, but told me she kept a key hidden underneath a flower pot in her backyard. What should have been a twenty-five minute drive only took fifteen minutes, and looking back I was lucky I didn't end up in the hospital or worse.

My heart was beating rapidly as I came to a screeching halt outside Halla's home. I jumped out of the car and slammed the door behind me, sweat dripping down my forehead as I took off. A chest-high wall blocked off Halla's property, and I ran alongside it until I reached a wrought iron gate leading into the yard. I swung it open and ran inside, frantically looking around for a flower pot matching the description Halla gave me. I finally spotted it; a bright-green clay vase that had seen better days, standing up against the wall of the house. It was empty, save for a frigid heap of dirt, and tiny pieces of it crumbled to dust as I yanked it aside, exposing the key hidden beneath.

Adrenaline rushed through my body as I ran back to the front of the house. I fumbled slightly with the key but eventually managed it, barging into the main hallway. Trailing dirt and gravel, I made my way down the corridor, past the array of reindeer statues, and I felt as if they had shifted in my absence. Their heads were raised to the wind, as if they had been made aware of some dark entity; an unseen predator stalking ever closer. I did not remember if the statues had looked like that during my first visit, but I quickly dismissed the idea. The sharp squeak of my shoes echoed through the house as I reached the end of the corridor and took a right around the corner. To my left was the kitchen; precariously stacked dishes rose from the sink like the Leaning Tower of Pisa and coffee cups lay strewn about the countertops. To my right was a stairwell, and I immediately bolted upstairs, two steps at a time. I reached the second floor, which consisted of four rooms, two on each side of a carpeted hallway, and a bathroom

straight ahead. The walls were covered with photos of Halla's children; as I ventured on I saw Ásta go from a starry-eyed little girl to a beautiful young woman, and Siggi from a delicate, diminutive boy to an empty space in group pictures.

The first room I barged into was Halla's office; rows of books rested on makeshift shelves, and a number of frames hung on the wall containing various photos, plaques and newspaper clippings pertaining to her career. The second room was Halla's bedroom, a surprisingly bare space with only a large bed, a single lamp and what appeared to be a family photo sitting next to a paperback novel on a small nightstand. The third time turned out to be the charm, and I entered Ásta's room.

The bedroom was slightly larger than her mother's, and felt cluttered in comparison. Several framed photographs hung on brightly painted walls, with even more photos pinned to a cork bulletin board above a small desk at the opposite end of the room. Almost all them were of Ásta with her friends, groups of overjoyed teenagers whose smiles were so wide the borders of the photos could barely contain them. A couple of posters for bands I had never heard of hung above her bed, which was small and unmade. Clothes lay in a heap on the floor, and various textbooks sat on a small bookcase next to the window. The sweet scent of perfume filled my senses, and for a second I felt as if I had smelled it somewhere before. I pushed the thought to the back of my mind as I approached her desk, pulled a small, black office chair out from under it and sat down facing a large computer monitor. I reached under the wooden table and turned the computer on, waiting an excruciating couple of minutes as the machine booted up. The monitor finally sprang to life, another group of identical musicians adorning the desktop background. Within seconds I had launched her web browser and scrolled anxiously down through its history. I finally reached the date before her disappearance and...

Damn it.

Ásta had been more meticulous in covering her tracks than I had given her credit for. According to the browser history, the last webpage she had visited was indeed *Já*, but she had deleted the results of her search. In a fit of desperation I entered every letter of the alphabet into the search bar, one at a time, in the hopes that the address she had typed in had been saved. When nothing came up, I slammed my fist onto the desk, rattling it down to its screws, and let out a half-scream, half-growl in

frustration. Knowing that the person you were looking for was out there somewhere had been torturous enough in New York, a city of roughly eight million people. But knowing that, of the 100.000 people living in Reykjavík, someone knew where Ásta was, made me want to burn down every single building until I found her.

I pushed the chair out from under me and stood up, running my hands through my hair and cursing silently. I desperately scanned the room, hoping for a single shred of information to point me in the right direction. I paced the floor, checking inside cabinets, under the bed, behind posters. There was nothing. I felt cold, familiar hands at the nape of my neck, and dead voices repeated the same two words over and over in my head.

Too late.

The anger coursed through me until it reached a fever pitch and I exploded in a furious howl. I swung my fist at the wall and it connected with a horrifying crack. I screamed again, clutching my wrist as my aching knuckle slowly began to turn a dark purple. There was a good chance I had broken some of my fingers, but I could not bring myself to care. I glanced down at my hand and slowly lowered it to my side. I looked up, my eyes scanning over Ásta's room for one last time. That was when I saw a printer, on the floor beside the desk.

One of my first cases as a detective was to investigate a flood of forged basketball tickets that had begun to pop up before every big game. My search eventually brought me to the doorstep of one Saul Henshaw, a low-level crook who had served some time for petty theft. Saul was smart, but he suffered from an ailment that many of his colleagues had fallen prey to: he was not as smart as he thought he was. He was smiling from ear to ear as my partner searched through his computer but found no trace of any wrongdoing. Of course, Saul had gone to great lengths to delete any incriminating evidence, and must have been quite proud to get one over on the NYPD. What he did not think of, however, was that most printers can reprint the last document produced. The look on Saul's face as page after page of basketball tickets came pouring out of his bargain-basement printer was one I would remember for a very long time.

I returned to Ásta's desk and sat back down. I had never been particularly computer-savvy, and so it took me a few minutes to find the settings for the printer. I went deeper and deeper into the impossibly complex world of printers, understanding

fewer and fewer words as I went, until a few minutes later, I found what I was looking for. Reprint last document.

I held my breath and clicked.

The dormant machine at my feet suddenly whirled to life, green lights flickering along its hull like slowly blinking eyes. The printer pulled a piece of paper into its maw and began its work, slowly pushing out what looked like a black-and-white map of Reykjavík. The sheet was still warm to the touch as I ripped it from the tray and examined it. I instantly recognized the map as one of downtown Reykjavík; I had spent countless hours staring at this same map as I slowly learned to navigate the city centre and tried my best to memorize the street names. A small, fuzzy pin marked the building that Ásta had searched for, and its address was written in bold letters below the image. I recognized the street; it was a squalid apartment building at the edge of the city centre, across the street from the harbour. It was no more than a five minute walk from my home.

Suddenly it was as if temperature in the room had risen immeasurably. My heart pounded like a drum of war and I felt sick to my stomach. Anger grabbed hold of my chest and squeezed, and I could hardly breathe. The room seemed to spin, and those two words echoing in my head.

Too late.

I folded the map and shoved it in my back pocket, darting out of the room. I leapt down the stairs and made my way outside. As I entered the car, in the moment before I turned the key in the ignition and the engine roared, I thought about calling the police. If the situation was as bad as I feared it was, I would not have time to convince them to listen to me; every second counted and I would have to go there alone.

That was my first mistake.

Chapter 7

When I reached downtown Reykjavík, I parked the car as close to the building as possible. It still meant a couple of minutes' walk, made all the worse by the crowd. Everybody and their grandmother came downtown on Sundays, most of them stalking through Kolaportið, a large warehouse-cum-marketplace, looking for a good deal with grumpy children trailing behind them. I fought through the hordes of people, once again ignoring the angered shouts directed at me as I pushed some of them out of my way. There were fewer people once I got past Kolaportið, and I ran down the street in the direction of the harbour. This far into the city, the contrast between Reykjavík's dual identities was stark; I was flanked by a library and an art museum on one side, and several nightclubs, still recovering from the previous night's debauchery, on the other. I finally reached the end of the street and on the corner stood the apartment building.

Most of the exterior of the ground floor was covered in graffiti. Someone had obviously set out to paint over it, most likely city workers attempting to cover Reykjavík's blemishes so as not to scare the tourists away. Whoever it was had soon discovered the law of graffiti: for every one tag you paint over, two will take its place. They seemed to have decided to cut their losses, and left the graffiti to slowly take over the entire first floor. The rest of the building was similarly neglected; the concrete had split in several places, giving the effect that it was just a matter of time before all four stories came tumbling down. The gutters were all but devoured by rust, the asphalt directly beneath them stained by tainted rain. I stood across the street, my eyes scouring the building, examining each window in order. Most of them were bare and caked with grime, making it difficult to see inside, while others were covered in thin cracks, as if the glass was being shattered in slow motion. Craning my neck upwards, I squinted as I noticed something peculiar about a window on the fourth floor.

It had been covered with a plastic bag.

I made my way across the street and stepped up to the front door. Taking a quick look around to see if anyone was watching me, I reached down and tested the door. As I expected, it was locked. I cursed to myself and stepped away, a couple of pedestrians glancing at me quizzically before disappearing into a restaurant down the road. I thought of my options, which were few and far between, and had almost decided

to kick the door down when I heard someone approaching it from inside the building. I did the first thing that came to mind and raced towards the door, reaching into my pocket and grabbing the keys to my own home and jamming them in the lock. The door swung open and I let it hit me in the shoulder, stumbling backwards as a young man emerged, a small stack of envelopes in his hand. He spotted me and his eyes went wide as he apologized in Icelandic.

“It’s okay,” I laughed. “I should have picked a better place to check my texts.”

I approached the door and leaned towards the front, removing my keys from the lock and smiling at the man, who still stood in the doorway, his eyes following me. “Do...” he began, confused, but I cut him off as I squeezed past him, taking a quick look at his mail.

“Thanks, Bragi.” I smiled and shoved my keys back in my pocket. Hesitating slightly, the man stepped outside and turned back to me, his face scrunched in an effort to remember me. “You should come over for a beer sometime,” I said as I pushed the door closed behind him. “I really want to get to know the neighbours, you know?”

He stood there, bewildered, as the door slammed shut. I turned and sighed, fully aware of how lucky that was. I had entered into a cramped, filthy hallway leading to an even smaller staircase. On the wall to my right hung a series of flimsy mailboxes in rows of five; one row for each floor. I immediately checked the top row for the box belonging to the apartment with the covered window. There was no name on it and it contained no mail.

Each decrepit step groaned in agony as I quickly climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. The smell of mildew and water damage became almost unbearable past the second floor, and I briefly felt like I was back in one of the countless ramshackle neighbourhoods in New York, where I had burst into buildings such as this and dragged criminals, kicking and screaming, out into the light. I finally reached the top floor, my advance now quiet and careful. The corridor was empty, and I continued down past four doors, two on each side of me, from which music blared, the bass seemingly shaking the foundations of the entire building. I reached the end of the hall, and stood in front of the entrance to the apartment where I believed Ásta had been lured.

Chipped, green paint covered the door, and the handle was cheap copper. I could still see the quickly fading outlines where the apartment’s number had once been

fastened. I cautiously pressed my ear against the wood, listening intently for any sounds coming from within. There was only silence on the other side. I took hold of the doorknob and slowly turned it, testing my luck as I had done outside. This, too, was locked. I took two steps back, never taking my eyes off the entrance. Still the smell of mould and rotting wood assaulted my senses, and I knew I wanted to burn my clothes as soon as I got back home. But then, suddenly, there was something else; a faint scent, there one second and gone the next. Underneath the smell of rot and decay, hidden, was something sweet. I knew I had smelled it somewhere before.

Ásta's perfume.

My foot slammed into the door, and it burst open. Splinters of wood exploded off the frame as I rushed inside the apartment. I looked around, shouting Ásta's name, but I got no reply. Only then did I realize the state of the apartment had not been what I expected it to be. The entire place was spotless; the walls were a pristine white, and the wooden floor shone as if freshly buffed. It looked like brand new apartment for sale, somewhere far away from the dilapidated tower that contained it. Every window was covered with black plastic bags, shutting out all but a few, faint rays of light. I delved further in, searching for Ásta in every room, only finding the same, immaculate and empty spaces.

"Ásta!!" I kept shouting, still only met with silence.

I finally came upon a closed door, which could only lead to the bathroom. I grabbed the handle and twisted, but it was locked. I shook it violently, pressing my shoulder against the door.

"Ásta, if you're in there step away from the door!" I called as I took a step back from the door and launched my foot at it. With a thundering crack, the door flew open and I stepped inside.

She was in the bathtub. She had been tied to the faucet, both hands raised above her head, and thick tape covered her mouth. The violet dress she had worn to her rendezvous clung to her body, stained with sweat and grime. She screamed as I burst into the room, the ragged sound caught in her throat, her body flailing wildly. Her eyes were wide in horror, tears and stale make-up streaking her face. I rushed to her, kneeling at the tub and grabbing her head.

“Ásta, Ásta,” I repeated as she sobbed wildly, instinctively reeling from my touch. “Ásta, it’s okay, it’s Mike, I’m here, I’m here!”

Slowly, she seemed to come to her senses, her body going limp as she stared at me in disbelief. With one hand I reached up and inspected the rope that held her tight.

“I’m going to take this off, okay?” I moved my hand to the tape at her mouth. “It’s going to hurt a little bit.”

In a swift motion I ripped it off, and she screamed out in pain and fear. “It’s okay, ssshh, it’s okay. I’m going to take you home, alright?”

Tears streamed down her cheek as she fought to get loose, repeating the Icelandic words for “mom” and “home” as I began loosening the rope. Her wrists had been rubbed raw, and coagulated blood stained her skin. I frantically worked at the rope as she cried, but something caught my eye. On the mirror, above the sink, a symbol had been painted in red; a circle divided into four parts, with each part containing a separate symbol. In one corner was a crudely drawn fist, in another was what looked like horns. The third symbol was a wing, and the fourth was fire. I paused, and I felt like I had seen the markings somewhere before. I searched my mind, staring at the mirror, before Ásta cried out for me to untie her. I shook the thought off, and, after a moment, had loosened the ropes enough so that Ásta’s petite hands slipped loose.

“Alright, come on, can you stand?” I asked. She replied with a nod as she attempted to pull herself out of the bathtub. I offered her my hand for leverage and she took it, looking up at me. Suddenly her eyes went wide once more. I sensed movement behind me, and Ásta screamed.

I turned quickly, but I was too slow. A dark figure came rushing into the bathroom, and before I managed to stand its foot crashed into the side of my head. The collision sent me flying backwards and I saw bright lights, agonizing pain coursing through my head as I fell onto the porcelain tub. Dazed, I reached out for something to grab hold of, but found nothing. All I could hear was Ásta’s screams piercing the air, as my vision finally returned to me. Ásta was curled into a ball in the tub behind me, and I heard panicked footsteps outside the bathroom. With great effort I pushed myself off the floor, the dizziness almost causing me to collapse again. I reached into my pocket and grabbed my cell phone. I turned and handed it to Ásta, who immediately reached out and grabbed it.

“Call the police, now!” I called to her as I turned and hurriedly stumbled out of the bathroom. I emerged into the apartment and sprinted towards the front door. There was a dull throbbing in my head as I ran out into the hallway, leaning on the walls for support. At the far end of the corridor I saw the dark figure disappear down the stairs, and followed suit. I staggered down the stairwell, both hands clutching the banister, as the figure reached the ground floor and I heard him barge out into the city. I almost fell numerous times, but eventually made it to the bottom of the staircase and chased him outside.

I winced as I exited the building, the harsh sunlight blinding me. I felt as if the inside of my skull was being scraped, as I raised my arm to block the sun. It took my eyes a few moments to acclimate, and as they did I scoured the street for any sign of whoever I was chasing. I finally spotted him across the street; a hooded figure that ducked behind a small building close to the harbour. He was wearing a thick sweater that almost reached his thighs, and the hood prevented me from seeing any discerning features. As he vanished from sight, I gave chase. I shot across the street, several cars coming to a screeching halt mere inches from my body. When I reached the sidewalk, I kept running towards the building he had disappeared behind; it was a small, single story bar that stood alone at the entrance to the harbour. I made my way to the corner of the house, and pressed my back up against it. The road behind the bar led straight to the docks, with the building itself on the left and a drop into the freezing water on your right. Several feet away was an abandoned ship; lying on its side and stripped of its organs like a wounded animal that had fallen prey to scavengers. My hand instinctively reached to my side, expecting my service pistol but there was nothing there. I winced as a sudden pain shot through my stomach, and then was gone. I shook my head, and took a deep breath, steeling myself as I counted down from three and turned the corner.

Nothing. All I could see were crates and machinery. Further down the road were large containers with company logos plastered across their sides, and one massive ship docked in the harbour like a slumbering giant, its name painted in large letters across the stained hull. Cautiously, I continued onwards, listening for any sign of movement. The sun had begun its descent, the winds growing colder as the night made its claim. In the distance I heard sirens.

I passed by empty boxes, stopping by every nook and cranny and preparing myself for a fight, but nothing came. The entire docks were eerily silent, as if the world itself was holding its breath. I could only hear the ocean, mercilessly slamming into the rocks below. It had been a long time since I had chased someone into an alleyway, and I was in worse shape than I had been for a long time. The doubts began slithering up my spine, but still I pressed on, the pain in my stomach becoming almost unbearable. I stopped dead in my tracks as I saw movement ahead. A few feet away, two large crates were stacked up against a fence, and something behind them had shifted. I crept closer, holding my breath and readying myself for whatever I would find, my hands forming into fists as the only weapons I could use.

And then I heard something by my side. From the corner of my eye I saw a shadow come to life; a form detaching itself from a dim corner the sun no longer reached, or never did. Once again I was too slow. Something heavy and wooden struck me in the back of the head and I collapsed onto the freezing concrete.

I was on my back, my head swimming. I could not focus on anything; all I saw was a blur, like the entire world had shifted out of focus. I lost all control of my limbs, the weight of them keeping me pinned to the cold ground. I stared up at the sky, at the last, fading glimmers of sunlight. Suddenly my vision grew darker as a shadow fell across my world. The figure towered over me, and all I saw was a horrendous void that devoured the light around it. I tried to speak, but nothing came out.

It knelt by my side, and everything went black.

Chapter 8

“You really are lucky, you know that?”

Karen ran her hand through my hair, her fingers trailing down the nape of my neck. She smiled, and nothing else mattered.

“Oh, I’m the lucky one?” I feigned outrage. “I’ll have you know I am considered quite attractive.”

Her hand moved down to my chest, anchoring me in this time and place. The covers lay in a heap at our feet, and the pillows cradled our heads softly. She looked off into the distance, as if she was deep in thought. “Nah,” she smiled, looking back to me. “I could do better.”

Outside our window, clouds hung motionless in the sky as if the world itself stood still, allowing us this moment. I pulled her close and we kissed.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.” She caressed my cheek, and I closed my eyes.

I took her hand in mine and I kissed her palm, the scent of her seeping into me, filling the hole left behind. I looked back up at her, and I could see her eyes go pale.

“I’m sorry.”

She nodded. “I know.”

“Please, don’t go.”

But I could already hear it. The beating of merciless wings outside our bedroom; a shape blackened the sky and I held Karen tight. “Please.”

She squeezed my hand and closed her eyes as tears rolled down her face. I saw her lips move, but the thunderous wings drowned out the sound of her voice. I blinked away my own tears, but when I opened my eyes she was gone.

And all that was left was her silence.

* * *

When I regained consciousness, I felt the familiar sensation of dull pain partially suffocated by medication. My eyes seemed glued shut, and it took some effort to pry them open. I immediately regretted the decision. My senses were assaulted by the blinding brightness of the light bulb fixed to the ceiling above me. I shut my eyes and

turned my head, the discomfort from the light replaced by an agonizing pain in my neck. I let out a sound not unlike the one people make when they stub their toe, as I reached up and softly rubbed the muscles in my neck. I felt a tug at my arm as I moved and, once I had sufficiently prepared myself for the light, opened my eyes again to see that an IV line trailed from my forearm to a small plastic bag filled with a clear liquid, which hung on a thin, metal pole next to my bed. I slowly looked around, taking care not to strain my neck, and took in my surroundings. I was lying in a single bed at the centre of a small room. The floor seemed to be made of a strange, spotted plastic material and the walls were covered in tiles that could have set a new world record in “beige”. A small television set stood on a shelf in the corner, facing the bed, on mute but blazing with bright colours and blurs I could not make out and made my head hurt even more. The unmistakable commotion of nurses and patients outside my door helped my barely-functioning mind piece together where I had found myself, but it was the excruciatingly clichéd and amateurish painting on the wall, featuring a lone boat at sail, that clinched it: I was in the hospital.

I lay there for a moment, waiting impatiently for my mind to shake off the dulling high of whatever medication I was on, but suddenly my eyes shot open. Memories came flooding back to me; images and sensations all at once, jumbled together like a puzzle only I could put together. I shot upwards, ignoring the heaviness of my limbs and the pain in my head and torso. Wincing, I swung my legs off the bed, my bare feet hitting the cold floor with a soft slap, my hospital gown trailing behind. I began ripping at the adhesive tape securing the IV line to my arm, frantically looking around for my clothes. I noticed them draped over a small, green chair that stood on the other side of my bed and attempted to stand up. As soon as my weight shifted onto my legs, my knees buckled and I fell, grabbing hold of the bed’s metal railing. I screamed out, feeling like my head was about to explode from the pain.

“Woah, woah!” a familiar voice called out. I felt two large hands grab me by the shoulder and slowly raise me up onto the bed. I had not heard the door open but, then again, the state I was in I probably would not have heard a passenger jet take off next to me. I slowly opened my eyes to see Ólafur at eye-level, his hand on my shoulder and a worried expression on his face. “Easy, take it easy. You’re in the hospital.”

“Ás...” I began, but the words were caught in my dry throat and I coughed.
 “Where’s Ásta?”

“She’s fine, Michael.” Ólafur patted me softly on the shoulder. “She’s okay.”

Relief hit me like a freight train, my mind latching onto Ólafur’s words and the pounding of my heart slowing down, beat by beat. I could feel tears welling up behind my eyes, and I nodded.

“You did it, Michael, she’s safe.” Ólafur’s grip on my shoulder tightened for a moment, before he let go and stood up straight. Only then did I realize how dishevelled he looked. He stretched his back, grunting as he splayed his hands out to his sides, and I noticed that his suit was covered in wrinkles. The same striped tie he had been wearing when I first met him hung loose around his neck, its colours somehow faded. A small, dark spot stained his shirt where he had spilled coffee on it at some point, and I realized that if he had slept at all, it had been in the torture device known as a waiting room chair.

“Where is she now?” I asked in a hoarse voice, and I felt like I was coughing up razors.

Ólafur finished his stretch with a satisfying gasp. “You guys came in yesterday and the doctors examined her from top to bottom. Aside from a few cuts and bruises, she was okay. Pretty shaken up, of course, so her mother took her home.”

He grabbed his tie and fastened it, patting it gently to straighten it out. I wanted to tell him the only way that tie would ever look good was at the bottom of a garbage heap, but I decided against it.

“I sent a couple of officers with them.” He walked to the other side of my bed, threw my clothes onto the covers and pulled the chair back with him. “I’ll have someone watch their house for the next few days, just in case,” he said as he lowered himself into the chair, like a square peg crammed into a round hole.

“Good.” I doubted whoever kidnapped Ásta would come after her again, but I preferred Ólafur err on the side of caution. I reached over and pulled my clothes closer, and I sensed that getting them on would be challenging.

“Could she give you anything on the guy?” I asked, but I already knew the answer. Whoever had taken Ásta was smart, patient and careful. The fact that I had

found her alive likely meant the kidnapper had never intended on killing her, which in turn made it unlikely he had shown her his face.

Ólafur shook his head, confirming my suspicion. “When he took her, he came at her from behind, knocked her out with chloroform. Whenever he brought her food and water, he was wearing a hood.”

I could feel something at the back of my mind; like a spark, or an itch that wouldn’t go away. I had felt it before, during my search, but had dismissed it then as mere paranoia, my mind getting in the way of the case. I knew that the police would focus their initial search on anyone and everyone who had a predilection towards teenage girls and a criminal record to match, but what if whoever had taken Ásta had done so for another reason?

“So, Mike.” Ólafur spoke, snapping me back to the hospital room. “Why don’t you tell me how this all went down?”

We sat there for twenty minutes as I recounted the events that led me to that apartment in downtown Reykjavík. Ólafur sat, listening intently, hard at work trying to piece together something, anything, that would bring us closer to the man responsible. When I finished, Ólafur nodded slowly and stared at the wall for a second, desperately searching for something we had missed. But there was nothing.

He sighed, rubbing his hands over his weary face. “Well, my people went over that apartment with a fine tooth comb and found nothing. The son of a bitch is a ghost.

“Listen, the doctors want to keep you here at least another day...” Ólafur smiled, because I had already begun wrestling my shirt onto my torso. “I figured. In any case, I recommend leaving through the back,” he said, pulling himself from his chair. “There’s a flock of reporters in the lobby waiting to get at you.”

“Thanks,” I said as I my head emerged from the neckline. My entire body was aching, and I looked down at my pants. They would be my Everest.

“You call me if there’s anything, alright? Anything at all.” He took my hand and shook it gently. “You did an amazing thing, Mike.”

He turned and left, leaving me to my task of getting dressed.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later I emerged from the back entrance of the hospital. I could smell the freshly fallen rain on the pavement, the setting sun casting an otherworldly glow on the wet streets. I had called a taxi as I made my way down the sterilized hallways of the City Hospital, and watched as it pulled up by the sidewalk, its tyres making a crunching sound on the asphalt. I limped towards the car and the driver eagerly jumped out, holding the passenger door for me as I slipped inside. I thanked him, gave him my address and stared out the window as he drove.

I thought of Ásta. Her life had been forever altered, her innocence stolen from her as if a butcher had taken his blade to it. Thankfully I had found her before that monster had taken even more; he could have killed her, or worse. Even so, it would take a long time before she recovered, if she ever did. The events of the last few days would haunt her, invading her every thought and memory. But she was alive. She was safe. The man who had taken her was still out there, but I trusted Ólafur to find him. Eventually, something would give, the kidnapper would slip up and that monster's city of cards would come crashing down around him. But I would not be there when it happened, and I had to remind myself that that was okay.

This was not my case.

I had done what Frikki and Halla had asked me to do.

This had nothing to do with me anymore.

I lost track of time and it was only when the driver repeated the cost of the trip that I realized we had arrived at my apartment building. I apologized and rummaged through my pockets for cash, handing him a couple of bills and telling him to keep the change. It took me longer than my ego liked to pull myself out of the car, but I eventually managed it and entered the building. There was nothing in my mailbox, but then there rarely was. I shuffled through the lobby and pressed the elevator button, never having been more grateful for a piece of technology in my life. I leaned against the railing in the elevator on the way up, pulling a small box of pills out of my pocket. When my doctor had realized that he would not be able to convince me to stay in the hospital, he begrudgingly prescribed me a strong painkiller before checking me out, which I had filled out at a small drug store within the hospital. I took one pill to fight back the pain that had begun to creep back up my body, as a familiar ring signalled my arrival on the sixth floor. The elevator doors slid closed behind me and I hobbled down

the corridor to my apartment, maneuvering painfully to reach the keys in my jacket pocket. I hurriedly unlocked the door, already tasting the whiskey waiting for me on the other side.

I felt it as soon as I stepped inside. A strange sensation, as if I had walked into another person's home. Something seemed off, like someone had come in and rearranged all the furniture while I was away. I closed the door behind me and made my way further inside, placing my keys on the kitchen counter as I scanned the apartment slowly. It was still a mess after the three amigos had broken in, but I had managed to clean most of the dirt and blood off the floors, with some difficulty. Everything was in its place, yet I felt as if the entire apartment had been shifted, like I was looking at my home through a fun house mirror. At first I thought someone was inside, that I was getting another visit from those gangsters, and my torso ached at the thought. I stood there, listening closely for any sounds, but all was quiet. My eyes went from the bathroom, to the hallway leading to my bedroom, and finally came to a stop on the living room table.

Sitting in the centre of the glass was a small, green box, roughly the size of a football. Bright, yellow smiley faces dotted the exterior of the box, and a red ribbon had been tied around it, a large bow resting on the lid. It would have looked right at home sitting on top of a pile of similar boxes at a child's birthday party, but its presence in my home sent a shiver down my spine. I took another glance around the apartment before slowly approaching the living room and sitting down on the couch. I pulled the box closer, carefully turning and inspecting it from all sides. It didn't weigh much at all and, as I shifted it, felt something small but bulky slide around inside. I placed it back on the table and began working at the ribbon. It unravelled and fell and, after taking a deep breath, I slowly pulled the lid off.

Inside the box was a plain, white envelope and a small, cheap looking cell phone. I set the lid aside and reached for the phone, turning it over in my hand as I had the box it came in. I pressed a button on the side and it hummed to life, vibrating briefly as a short melody played and the logo of an Icelandic phone company was displayed on the screen. I spent a minute or so looking through the contents of the phone, but found nothing; there were no images, messages or contacts. I placed it on the glass and delved

into the box for the envelope, which felt light but bulged slightly at the centre. I tore the side off and emptied the contents onto the table.

A small bundle of what looked like hay fell from the envelope and hit the glass with a soft thud, followed by a photograph that landed face down. I reached for the bundle, only realizing what it was as I took it in my hand and felt the soft strands against my flesh. Someone had sent me a bale of blonde hair, tied with the same red ribbon as the container. The reluctance and sense of unease I had felt when I first came home had been replaced by a morbid sense of curiosity as I unwrapped the present that had been brought to me. The curiosity, in turn, became confusion. I stared at the bundle, struggling to understand, as a feeling crept up my spine that whoever left this here had expected me to. It felt like reading a story I had read countless times before, but in a language I did not understand. Still inspecting the bundle, I reached, almost absentmindedly, for the photograph. I turned it over and glanced at it, and all of a sudden the puzzle pieces came together as my world fell apart.

The photo was of Karen. She was lying in the snow like a discarded doll, blood pouring from her broken body, staining the white around her with crimson, encasing her in an aura of death. Her pale, shattered arms were spread out to her sides as if she was waiting for a warm embrace to rescue her from the cold; a warm embrace that never came. Clumps of bloodied hair covered her face, but dead eyes stared pleadingly out from underneath, eyes that were much too young to see the end. My hands began trembling as a profound feeling of instability came over me, as if the entire world had been shifted on its axis. Blood rushed from my face and my vision blurred, beads of ice cold sweat forming all over my body. The bundle of what I knew, deep down, was Karen's hair fell from my limp hand and I shot to my feet, grabbing hold of whatever was closest as I ran to the bathroom. I collapsed in a heap in front of the toilet, clutching the bowl as the contents of my stomach came pouring out and stained the porcelain with vomit and tears. The pain in my gut was searing, and I felt as if I was being ripped apart from the inside. With each retch every muscle and organ in my body tensed painfully, as if they were attempting to flush out my racing heart. My entire body betrayed me, and I struggled to breathe as my head hung limp over the rim, my own choking echoing back at me mockingly.

And then, over the sound of my world being shattered for the second time, I heard the phone ring.

In that moment I seized back control of my body, tossing myself away from the toilet and crawling towards the living room, before I managed to stumble back to my feet. I threw my weight onto the doorframe and knives shot down my entire side. The phone danced across the glass and the apartment was filled with the deafening noise of its vibration, while the screen flickered and blinked wildly. I jumped from out of the bathroom, letting the momentum carry me to the couch where I stumbled and almost fell. I reached down and snatched the phone off the table.

“Who are you!?” I screamed, my voice filled with rage.

There was silence on the other end of the line, but then a man’s voice softly slithered through the earpiece. He spoke with a lisp, like gas escaping from a balloon. “She was beautiful, our sweet little bird, wasn’t she?”

“I said who the hell are you!?” I roared, the phone’s plastic shell cracking slightly in my grip.

“Come on, Michael, we’ve known each other for ages,” he chuckled, a cold sound, as he spoke to me like you would an old friend. “You just need a little help to remember.”

My mind raced, confusion wrapping itself around me like a strait jacket, and each word out of my mouth came in strained gasps. “What did you do to my wife...”

“I’m sorry, Michael. I tried to help her remember, but she wouldn’t listen.” His attempt at sympathy sounded like a machine trying to emulate human emotion. “I had to end her, so that she may find another vessel, one that remembers. But now I have found you, and together we can seek her out once she is reborn in flames, and we will all finally be together.”

I suddenly saw him in my mind. The moonlight bouncing off his shaved head, his clammy, skeletal hand gripping mine like a vice, and yellow teeth bared like fangs as he smiled at me and offered his condolences. “Elías...” I said, and he laughed.

“Yes, that is my name,” he hesitated, and I heard him take a deep breath and sigh, as if he was savouring the moment. “At least, this time around,” he said, and I could hear moist lips part into a smile.

“You know, at first I was not so sure about you, Michael. I mean, you’re not even Icelandic!” Once again he laughed.

“I’m going to kill you,” I growled, my jaw clenched.

Elías continued, and I did not know if he had not heard me, or if he had ignored it. “But then I saw that video of you, rescuing that poor mortal girl from some mindless thug, and I knew I had to see you for myself.” I heard a strange rubbing noise on the line; it sounded as if he was lovingly stroking the mouthpiece of his phone. “And when I looked into your eyes that night, when I...touched your skin...I was all but certain.”

With each word he spoke I could feel his damp hands across my body, and I had to stifle my own gag reflex.

“All I had to do was give you a little test and, oh, you passed.”

A test?

“Ásta...”

“Mm,” he moaned approvingly. “That was when I knew I had found you, my dear, strong giant. I do apologize for the tussle in the harbour, old friend.” His tone shifted to something approaching genuine concern. “But you understand, I was not ready for you quite yet. Now, we can be together again, and we can finally begin.”

“Begin?” I asked, hating myself for taking part in whatever sick game he was playing. “Begin what?”

“What we have been doing for centuries,” he said with vigour and pride. “What the enemy has tried to prevent us from doing. They are destroying this country, Michael, and we have to save it.”

“What are you talki-”

“But I can’t do it alone, and soon I won’t have to.” He took another deep breath, and I wanted nothing more than to hear him choke on it. “When the four of us reunite, there will be nothing they can do to stop us.”

“Listen to me, you piece of shit. I don’t care what flavour of crazy you are. I am going to find you,” I spoke through gritted teeth. “And I am going to kill you with my bare hands.”

Elías sighed. “You will remember, soon enough. And when you do, our fury will rain down upon our enemies and their hubris and their greed and their corruption will be cleansed from this land.”

“I’M GOING TO KI-“ I roared and felt as if my throat would explode. I heard a click, and the line went dead.

Outside, the sun made its escape and night came.

* * *

I do not know how long I sat there, unmoving, in the dark. I did not eat, drink or sleep, and had I even wanted to, the now dull ache in my stomach would have prevented it. I just sat, staring at the painting on the wall opposite me, my mind struggling to process and comprehend what had just happened.

I remember pouring over the facts of Karen’s accident in the days following her death, as if I could find some way to take it all back. She had rushed out of the house when I called her, drunkenly asking her to pick me up from the shithole bar I had hid in. It had been snowing heavily that day and the powder covered everything. Something had happened to cause Karen to swerve violently and the ice hiding beneath the snow had taken control. The car spun and crashed into a concrete wall. Had she been wearing a seat belt, she would have probably survived. But she had been in a hurry to collect her deadbeat husband from a pub. It was horrible, the doctor later told me, but it was an accident.

I shouldn’t blame myself.

It was no one’s fault.

But I had not lost Karen. I knew that now. She had been taken away from me. And for that, the one responsible would pay with his life.

It felt as if time had come to a screeching halt and, for what felt like an eternity, I sat in silence. The quiet was suffocating, adrenaline still coursing through my veins as my heart pumped furiously, converting all the grief and sadness in my being into pure, unfiltered rage. Eventually the sounds of traffic began creeping in through the window; cars revving to life and people hurriedly making their way to work, embarking on yet another day in an endless cycle of identical days. I hated them all in that moment, for I felt as if the earth had no business turning without Karen. The man who had murdered her was still breathing, and that was in injustice I could not bear. I looked down from the painting to a small, hastily assembled cabinet, upon which stood an ornate, wooden clock that Frikki had given us when we moved to Iceland. My eyes

were sore and I had to rub them before I could focus my vision, and when I did I realized it had been more than nine hours since the phone call.

It had been just as long since I had last taken any medication. It hurt to move, a dull ache in my back making it difficult to stand up, while an agonizing pain shot down from my right shoulder down into my chest when I tried to stabilize myself on the glass table. I ignored it, pulling myself from the couch and limping into the bathroom. I reached for the bottle of pills on my way and threw three of them into my mouth, chomping them greedily and swallowing. In the bathroom, I stared at myself in the mirror; I was cut and bruised, my eyes red and slightly swollen and flecks of vomit still stained the corners of my mouth. I let the water run for a few seconds and washed my face before stumbling back out into the living room.

I stared out the window, out across the water and the mountains beyond. The sky had begun its slow change from dark blue to a vivid pink, the sun once again rising lazily in the distance. I did not know why the man who called himself Elías had taken my wife from me. I only knew that, in doing so, he had made his own life forfeit.

A new day had arrived, and I knew what I had to do.

I made my way into the bedroom and spent a few minutes looking through a pile of dirty clothes by the bed. When I spotted the jeans I was looking for, I rummaged through the pockets until I found the card where I had crumpled it into a ball and forgot about it. I shuffled back out into the living room and grabbed my phone, dialling the number on the card before crumpling it up once again and chucking it to the floor.

It rang twice before a woman's voice greeted me in Icelandic.

"Ms. Jóhannsdóttir, this is Michael McMorrow. Do you still want that interview?"

Chapter 9

Dark, heavy clouds floated like blimps overhead, the low winter sun struggling to break through, and a cold wind blew in through the rolled down window of my car. During my time with the NYPD I had been on several stakeouts which, contrary to popular belief, did not consist of eating donuts for twenty minutes followed by kicking in doors with your gun raised. Most of the time you ended up sitting in a cramped car with another officer whose understanding of the term “personal space” was tenuous at best, drinking stale coffee and taking turns going to the bathroom. You would spend entire nights staring at a suspect’s house, as if it was only a matter of time before he walked out with a giant “I am guilty” sign, all the while keeping so still, in case anyone spots you, that your body starts to go into rigor mortis. After a while I had gotten used to it, but that was a long time ago. I looked down at my watch as, even though it had only been forty minutes, my joints ached and my muscles were sore to the touch. I took a look at the time and hoped I would catch a break sooner rather than later.

That morning I had called María, the reporter who had come to my home after the video of my altercation with the biker went viral. She told me most of the newspapers were planning some huge stories on Ásta’s kidnapping and, in particular, my involvement in her rescue. She said every two-bit journalist in the country would be hounding me, rummaging through my life like a rat in a garbage bin, hoping to find something to extend their coverage of the story for another day.

“Including you?” I had asked.

“I’m right at the front of the pack,” she replied.

As soon as I mentioned the possibility of an exclusive interview, I could almost hear her begin to salivate. To her credit, she kept a cool head and immediately asked me what the catch was, what I wanted in return. When she assured me she had a pen and some paper, I gave her everything I had on Elías which, as she rightfully pointed out, was not a whole lot.

“Who is this guy, anyway?” she asked, scribbling down the last of my notes on his appearance.

“He owes me something,” I stated bluntly. “Get me anything you can find on him and the exclusive is yours.”

“And what if I don’t find anything?”

“You’re a journalist,” I said. “You people always find something.”

* * *

The next call I made was to Frikki. The phone only rang once before he picked up.

“What the hell is your problem?” he shouted so loud I flinched, moving the phone away from my head as if I was expecting a smack. When I was relatively certain I wouldn’t get another earful, I brought the phone back to my ear.

“Hello to you, too.”

“Don’t give me that shit.” I felt like I was fourteen years-old again, caught stealing smokes from my dad’s jacket. “You were found beat half to death in an alley, and I have to find out from the damn doctor that you decided to check yourself out of the hospital?”

“Listen, Frikki...” I began, but he cut me off.

“No, you listen, Mike.” His words were heavy with emotion, more so than I had ever heard from him. “You may not give a shit what happens to you, but we do. You think just because Karen is gone, you’re not family?”

Frikki’s words hit me like a ton of bricks, and I felt immense shame. I had checked myself out of the hospital and went straight home, not bothering to call Frikki, or Halla for that matter. There had been several missed calls from Frikki after I got home and while I could have told him I planned on calling him back, it would have been a lie. I had fully intended on shutting myself off for the foreseeable future, until I was forced back out into the world by a single phone call.

“You may think you’re alone but you’re not.”

“Frikki, I...” I paused, trying to find something to say. “I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s...” Frikki began, before letting out a deep sigh. “Damn it. I’m sorry, Mike. It’s good to hear from you.”

We talked for half an hour. I told him everything I had learned during my search for Ásta and what had happened in that apartment. He, in turn, told me that he had arrived at the hospital with Halla mere moments after Ásta was admitted. I was admitted twenty minutes later, after some trespassing kids had stumbled upon me,

bleeding in the gutter. Frikki had checked on me but I was unconscious, and so he took his sister and niece home, spending the day with them and planning to visit me the following day. When he got to the hospital, I was gone.

“They don’t have much to go on,” he told me when I asked him if the police had any new developments. “But they’re good cops, they’ll get him eventually.”

I felt a tug in my chest. I suddenly realized, through the thick haze of anger that was propelling me, that the man I was after had not just murdered my wife, but Frikki’s daughter too. He had a right to know that Karen’s death was not an accident, that someone had taken her from us. But I could not risk him going to the police with what I knew. Despite the countless speeches to the contrary that I had given family members of murder victims, the law was not the same thing as justice. When this was all over, the law could judge me as it saw fit. But I would have justice.

“I can’t thank you enough, Mike.” Frikki’s voice broke.

“Don’t thank me, Frikki. Like you said...we’re family,” I assured him, taking a deep breath and deciding it was time to ask him what I needed to know. “Frikki, do you still keep tabs on Siggi?”

Siggi, Halla’s son, had long since broken off whatever contact he had with his mother and sister, and they had not seen each other since Ásta was a child. It had broken Halla’s heart to hear her son say that he never wanted to hear from her again. But despite what he had screamed at her, he was still her son and she was still his mother. Halla had asked Frikki to keep an eye out for Siggi; he was too far gone for any semblance of help they could offer, but she could not bear not knowing where he was. Using his connections within the police department, Frikki usually knew exactly where to find his nephew.

“Siggi?” he asked, audibly confused. “What do you want with Siggi?”

“I need to talk to him about the guy I ran into a few nights back,” I said, assuaging my guilt by telling myself it was close enough to the truth.

“Oh,” he paused. Frikki was no fool, and I doubted he believed me. Or if he did, it was by a hair. “Well, the last time I knew he was selling drugs out of some filthy apartment in Breiðholt.”

“Any idea on whose behalf?” I asked, hoping for the right answer.

“Yeah, it’s one of those god damn biker gangs. Let me see...” he searched his memory, before giving me the answer I was looking for. “The Hell Riders, I think.”

“Alright, can you text me the address?”

“Sure. Hey, Mike...” he said, concerned. “You be careful, okay?”

I promised him I would be.

As soon as the text came through, I looked up directions on *Já* and headed off to where I had parked my car near the flea market. The sun hung in the sky, but only by a thread, and it was colder than it had been for a while. When I reached my car, I drove off to where I could hopefully find Siggi.

For what came next, I would need a gun.

* * *

To say the apartment building had seen better days would have been an understatement. There was almost no paint left on the building’s exterior, the only colour to be found on its grey and filthy shell was an array of unintelligible graffiti. Windows were either shattered or covered up and the front door hung loose on its hinges from being kicked in by the police every other weekend. I could almost smell the misery and addiction from here.

I had been there for an hour now, watching a steady stream of wasted lives shuffle hunched into the gaping maw of the drug den, only to emerge minutes later clutching something in their hand like an offering from the fountain of youth. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat, my muscles aching in my joints crying out for relief. To make matters worse, the bottle of water I had brought with me had begun making its way to my bladder, and I tapped my feet frantically as if that would help. Frustration had set in and I felt like I was wasting my time. A part of me wanted to barge in there and find Siggi, but I knew that if he wasn’t inside there would be very little stopping the bikers, who I assumed had seen the video, from finishing what they had started that night in my apartment.

Twenty minutes later, as the pressure in my bladder had become almost unbearable, the front door slowly opened and a tall, lanky form emerged. He had lost weight since I saw him last, and even then he had been gaunt. He wore a black hoodie and baggy pants that looked at least two sizes too big, and kept his head down as he

strode towards a nearby bus stop, incessantly scratching at his forearm; an addict's itch that he would never reach. I could see the logo on his hoodie from here; a large skull with daggers for teeth. I exited the car and went after him.

He looked up when I called his name, freezing momentarily like a deer caught in headlights. His first instinct was to run, but as I drew near he recognized me and relaxed somewhat. As I got closer, however, he tensed back up, no doubt remembering the last time we met and the parting gift I had left on his face.

"What the fuck do you want?" he spat in a thick, Icelandic accent, assuming a macho stance and tone of voice that fit him about as well as his pants.

"I just want to talk." I came to a stop a few feet away, raising my hands in much the same way I would to show a gunman I was unarmed.

He scoffed and turned away, continuing his gait. I reached out and grabbed his forearm, and in one swift motion he turned and pushed my hand away. There was anger in his eyes, and for the first time I saw his face up close. He had bags under his eyes and pockmarks scarred his lifeless face. There was a small bruise under his left eye, and the colour had begun to fade from his once blonde hair. Siggi looked thirty years older than he was, and I could tell he was well on his way to an early grave. "Don't fucking touch me, man!"

He looked off behind me, where a large, bearded man had appeared at the entrance to his place of business. The man, muscular and similarly clad in a skull hoodie, shouted something to Siggi as he made his way towards us.

"Listen, I need to talk," I said, my voice stern but reassuring Siggi that he was in charge of the situation. "It's about the man who took your sister."

Siggi paused, looking me in the eyes, and through the bravado I could see the faintest hint of affection at the mention of Ásta. After a few seconds, he looked back to his colleague and waved him away. The thug stopped, hesitating for a moment as he stared at me, no doubt trying to figure out where he had seen me before. Siggi called out in Icelandic, and I could only make out the word "okay". The man stood there for a while before nodding, still confused, and retreating back into the building.

Siggi took a look around, inspecting his surroundings in what I assumed was a nervous habit. "Cops don't know who he is," he stated, gnawing at the insides of his lower lip.

“I do.”

He once again stared into my eyes, failing to hide his own surprise. I could see his mind at work, trying to figure out why I had come to him. “So, go to the police then.”

“The police can’t help me,” I said, my voice steady as a rock and my eyes never leaving his. “You can.”

He nodded slowly as the pieces began moving into place in his head, and an unspoken understanding formed between us. His lips twitched, and he studied me from top to bottom, measuring me up. “And what do you want from me?”

“I need a gun.” I spoke bluntly. Every second Elías spent alive on this earth was an injustice I could not tolerate.

Siggi scoffed, shaking his head and taking another look around as if to see if there were any unmarked vans around. The neighbourhood was quiet, its inhabitants having the good sense to stay inside for fear of the cold, and men like Siggi. “I can’t help you with that.”

“Yes, you can.”

The wind picked up and a shiver ran down my spine. Siggi reached back and threw his hood over his head and stuck his hands into the pockets of his pants. “Even if I can...why would I help you?”

“Because I saved your sister’s life,” I said, before my voice deepened. “And because if you don’t, your friend back there will have scrape you off the sidewalk.”

Siggi’s eyes widened and he took a step back. His posture changed and he seemed to shrink before my eyes. I suddenly saw him for the lost child that he was, and felt a pang of guilt. But if he was not going to help me willingly, I had no choice.

He cursed under his breath and bowed his head, nervously kicking at the pebbles at his feet. He looked back up at me and nodded. “Alright, alright. I can hook you up tonight, I’ll text you the details.”

I gave him my number and turned to leave. I took one last glance towards the building where the young traded their lives for empty promises. The muscle-bound thug stood at the window and watched me as I made my way towards my car. As I approached the vehicle, I heard Siggi call.

“I thought you were one of the good guys.”

I stopped, my back towards him. The wind grew stronger, tugging at my body like invisible hands trying to steer me off the course I had set myself on. I took a breath.

“Not anymore.”

Chapter 10

I had a few hours to spare before hearing back from Siggi and so I went to a coffee house in the city centre. The fact that I had not slept was starting to affect me, my head feeling a bit heavier and my eyelids trying to slide together without me noticing. I ordered a large cup of coffee and sat down at a computer in a quiet corner of the shop. The place was bustling with activity, and the ruckus from my fellow customers did a good job of keeping me awake; at one point a waitress dropped an entire tray of coffee cups a few feet away from me, startling me back to life. I had thought about going back to my apartment, but it felt wrong. My wife's killer had stood there, walked its floors and breathed in its air. Despite my body desperately needing sleep, I could not stand the thought of going back there.

I emptied the first cup of coffee quickly, and felt my stomach rumble in objection. After ordering a second, I turned back to the computer and stared at the welcoming screen of an Iceland online search engine. I shut my eyes, ignoring the waitress as she set a fresh cup and my change on the table, and thought back to my conversation with Elías; the words he used in particular. Something had felt strangely...familiar about them.

What did he call me?

I squeezed the bridge of my nose between the tips of my fingers, forcing my mind back to the phone call.

He had called me his giant, and he had called Karen our sweet bird.

I searched my memory for the Icelandic translations. I knew bird meant "fugl", but had to look up giant, which came up as "risi". I typed in the words and hit search, selecting a small icon at the bottom of the screen that automatically translated the results to English. I sifted through them but found nothing of interest.

What was I even looking for?

I slammed my fist on the table with a loud bang, almost knocking my coffee cup over. Several nearby customers looked up at me, startled, before turning back to their own cups and speaking in hushed tones. I kept scrolling through page after page of results, all of them dead ends. I had almost closed the window when something suddenly caught my eye.

It was a name I had seen somewhere before. The cursor hung idly over the link before I clicked it, not expecting to find anything of importance wherever it took me. The first thing I saw when the page finally loaded was an image of a book cover. I instantly recognized it as the one I had seen in a newspaper a few days ago; a book detailing the various Icelandic sagas, written by the professor who had been killed in his home several months prior, and whose name I had recognized. I went back to the cover, staring intently at the Icelandic flag and four beasts of legend adorning the jacket. They were the four land wights; immensely powerful creatures, each of whom guarded a corner of Iceland from those who would do it harm. I vaguely remembered a story Karen had recounted from one of the Sagas a few weeks after we began our relationship: The king of Denmark planned on invading Iceland, and had one of his wizards turn into a whale in order to scout the coasts for weaknesses. The wizard swam to the four corners of the country, but was repelled each time by one of the land wights; a mighty bull in the west, a majestic eagle in the north, a towering stone giant in the south and a fierce dragon in the east. Faced with the might of Iceland's guardians, the king of Denmark abandoned his plans, and the land wights stood vigil over the country and its inhabitants for centuries. Understandably, Icelanders were quite fond of these mythic beasts, displaying them on their coat of arms, and even the back of their coins.

I glanced down at the change left by the waitress and turned one of the silver coins over, revealing the symbol adorning the coin's back. It was a circle split into four parts, with a land wight displayed in each window, corresponding to their respective corners of Iceland. I stared down at the symbol, and for some reason I could not look away. There was something forming at the back of my mind, a connection desperately waiting to be made. And then it came to me.

I had seen a crudely drawn version of that same symbol in the apartment where Elías had kept Ásta.

A chill ran down my spine as the pieces finally fell into place. The way he talked, it seemed clear that Elías was insane. He had referred to the girl I helped in the alley as a "mortal", as if he was something else. Something more. He talked of his mission to protect the country, despite "the enemies" that had tried to stop him.

Delusions of grandeur, extreme paranoia, and believing you are on a mission from God, or that you yourself are a god. I thought back to my time at the police

academy and realized that Elías was a textbook example of someone suffering from severe psychosis. Whatever mission he believed himself to be on, it had brought him to Karen. He had seen in her what he now saw in me, and asked her to follow him down into the darkest depths of his own insanity. She had refused and he had killed her, believing whatever resided within her would find a new host, and he would simply try again.

I thought of the professor, stabbed in his own home, and wondered how many times the cycle had repeated itself. How many people Elías had thought were like him, and tried to have remember a shared, past life. How many people he had murdered as they begged for their lives, assuring them that they would be reborn. And I wondered how many of them wanted desperately to believe him, as they lay dying and heard the darkness beckon them.

It became clear to me, in that moment, that Elías believed himself, and his victims, to be the land wights. Gods wandering among men, lost parts of a whole that had been shattered. A whole that he would do anything to put back together, in order to fight whatever his broken mind perceived to be a threat to Iceland.

His voice echoed in my skull and I felt nauseous, the familiar pain in the pit of my stomach returning. I grabbed hold of the table, the only thing keeping me upright, and my head swam. In his mind, Karen had been the eagle of the north, and I was the stone giant of the south.

And he was the dragon that had burned my world to ashes.

* * *

I spent the next few hours looking up anything and everything having to do with the land wights. It did not amount to much other than a few English articles and the translated Sagas themselves. When I had gone through it all, I searched for any information I could find on the professor's murder. What little I found described the case as a break-in gone bad. The professor lived in a large house in good neighbourhood, which had been plagued by burglaries in the past. The police figured that a junkie had broken in and been surprised to see someone was home. The professor had struggled, gotten stabbed for this trouble, and the suspect had emptied the house of valuables. Something about it bothered me. First of all, the door had not been broken

down or the lock picked; either it was already unlocked, which I doubted, or the professor had let his killer in. Second, there were no fingerprints or fibres found at the scene; in my experience, a junkie desperate enough to murder a man for a TV did not have the presence of mind to clean up afterwards. And third, the alarm had not gone off until after the professor had been killed.

I lost count of how many coffee cups I ordered, so when the waitress handed me the bill and politely told me they were closing, I was surprised she hadn't brought a hacksaw for my arm and leg. After settling up I grabbed my jacket and ventured out into the street, the evening winds calmer than earlier in the day. I was grateful at first, until I realized they were still brutally cold, just sneakier. Shops in the city centre were being closed, their employees desperate to get home to a hot meal, a warm shower and their families. I headed for my car, passing a few tourists, huddled together and seeking warmth, hurriedly retreating back to their hotel rooms after an evening spent buying Icelandic memorabilia and eating at local restaurants at prices that made my head spin. In a couple of hours the tour buses would start roaming the streets, going from one hotel to another, sucking up passengers like a vacuum cleaner, before heading out into the countryside where they would stare up into the black night sky in search of magic. When I had been in Iceland for a week, Karen brought me outside the city and for the first time in my life I saw northern lights. I felt like I was standing on an alien planet; that she had plucked me from earth and brought me to another world, somewhere far away from everything I knew. Aurora danced across the starry sky in waves of green, squirming and coiling in slow motion as I struggled to take it all in. I was filled with a sense of wonder and astonishment that I had not felt since I was a child, standing in near total darkness, my neck craned upwards and my arms around Karen's waist.

After Karen's death, I would look up at night. Aurora were rarely visible from the city but, sometimes, I could see them stretching across the black like ghostly hands, searching. I would feel her absence in those moments, like a hole in my chest.

It had been a long time since I looked up at night.

When I reached my car I jumped in and started it and immediately turned the heat way up. I held my hands against the fan, rubbing them together as the hot air thawed them out. I was starting to get nervous that I would not hear back from Siggi, and had planned on driving around aimlessly to take my mind off it. Just as I pushed the

key into the ignition, I heard the two familiar beeps I had been hoping to hear, reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone. Siggi had sent me a text message containing an address and instructions to be there in thirty minutes. I was familiar enough with the street name; it was only about a fifteen minute walk from where I parked. I sighed, said my goodbyes to the heater, and stepped out into the cold once again.

I don't know if it was the temperature or my nerves, but I walked so fast that I was there in less than ten minutes. I reached for my phone to make sure I was at the right address, before turning it off and putting it in my jacket pocket. The building was a small, single-story bar that I had walked past countless times on my drunken sojourns into the city. I had never gone in, merely because the neon signs in the window were for a brand of beer I disliked, but had often cast a sideways glance in its direction as laughter and rock music poured out into the streets. Tonight, it was quiet as a grave. The neon signs had been unplugged and hung dead in the windows, which were covered by thick, aluminium shutters. In between the bars of the blinds I could see a faint, warm light emanating from inside, and it almost looked as if I had stumbled upon a quiet cabin in the mountains. I took a look around; the streets were empty. I could hear the wind howling, but I had taken shelter close to the building, and it occurred to me that even the wind was not stupid enough to come so close to this place. I pushed open the door and stepped inside.

Cigarette smoke hung heavy in the air and my eyes watered immediately. My throat burned as I breathed in, and I stifled a cough as took a look around. The bar was dimly lit by a few cheap lamps that hung from the ceiling, and I doubted the place had ever been cleaned; a thin layer of dust, or cigarette ash, covered almost every surface, with the only clean spots shaped like the bottom of a glass. Cracked peanut shells littered the floor and spilled beer stained it, threatening to permanently glue me in place if I didn't keep moving. At the centre of the floor was the bar itself, and on each side a row of seats that looked like they had been built by someone who had never heard of the term "structural integrity". Up against the walls on each side were a set of booths, going all the way to the back of the room. A grand total of four fans hung low and struggled to disperse the smoke, but they were both outnumbered and outmatched. The place was mostly empty, with only two large men sitting by the bar, and who I assumed was the bartender behind the counter. They were all heavily tattooed, bearded and dressed in

black leather jackets, almost drinking in tandem as if someone had created the antithesis to the Stepford Wives. The man behind the counter was the only one who looked up from his glass, inspecting me lazily before nodding his head to the side, directing me to the back of the bar.

The sticky floorboards creaked beneath my feet as I walked on. Propped up against the wall on the far end, directly ahead of me, was a jukebox that looked so old and heavy I figured the bar was probably built around it. Its lights glowed a pale yellow, and as I got closer I could hear Mick Jagger singing about czars and ministers. From out of the corner of my eye I saw a large man get up from the last booth on my left, blocking the jukebox. For the third time in less than a week I was face to face with the behemoth whose face I had rearranged on camera. He glared at me as if he was trying to kill me through sheer force of will. The memory of his visit to my apartment, of his gun pressed against my head, was still fresh in my mind, but I pushed it down and kept on walking. I got as close to him as I felt comfortable getting, which meant just out of arm's reach.

"Wait, don't tell me," I said, motioning to the bruising on his face, which was just now beginning to fade. "You kind of liked it and now you want more."

His eyes went wide in anger and he stepped towards me. I instinctively balled up my fists and shifted my weight to my left leg, but a voice coming from the booth beside us stopped him dead in his tracks. His head snapped towards whoever spoke, and he looked like a vicious dog that just had its leash yanked. He growled something in Icelandic, but the voice in the booth was calm. I stood there as the two men talked, before my friend turned back to me, still fuming, his jaw clenched so tight it looked like his teeth would shatter. With one last grunt, he strode past me and towards the front entrance, kicking it open with a loud bang and disappearing outside.

"I apologize for Stefán," the voice spoke and I moved closer. "He is having a hard time letting bygones be bygones."

The man sitting in the booth looked to be around fifty years old, clean shaven with grey, slicked back hair. He wore clothes that looked like they cost more money than I had ever held at one time, and a gold chain hung around his neck. An unlit cigarette dangled from his mouth, and he motioned for me to sit down.

“I, on the other hand, consider the matter resolved,” he said, as he lit a match and held it to the cigarette. He spoke perfect English which, coupled with his appearance, made him seem as out of place in this particular establishment as a cheerleader would. He took a long drag of his cigarette and watched me as I squeezed into the booth. For a while he said nothing, measuring me up as the ash from his cigarette fell to the table in large chunks.

Finally, he spoke. “So you are the hero cop from America.”

“I’m not a cop anymore,” I said, my eyes locked in with his.

“Ah,” he smiled, wagging his finger at me. “But still a hero, from what I hear.”

I decided I would let it go. “So, you’re in charge?”

The man nodded. “My name is Ari Gunnar,” he said, exhaling a large plume of smoke that rose into the air before being swept up by the ceiling fan above us. I remembered the name, for it had saved me from a bullet. “But please, by all means, call me Ari.”

He finished his cigarette and pressed it down into the pile of ash in front of him. It sizzled as the ember burned into the wood, leaving a black mark. He swept the ashes to the floor with his hand, and a silver ring on his finger scraped the wood. “Now, what can I do for you, mister McMorro?”

I knew at this point that most people in Iceland who opened up a newspaper knew my name, but it still took me by surprise. “Let’s not pretend you don’t know why I’m here,” I said.

Ari smiled again. “Straight to business, I admire that.”

He leaned forward, clasping his hands together. “But what makes you think I can help you in this matter of yours?”

“I have money.” I reached into my jacket pocket and grabbed the envelope containing a sizeable portion of the cash I had.

Ari raised his hand to me and shook his head. “As do I, mister McMorro, and I have no need for yours.”

I stopped, withdrawing my hand from my pocket. There was a sinking feeling in my stomach, and I felt like I had stepped into something I was not prepared for. Ari Gunnar produced another cigarette from a small, metal holster at the edge of the table. He lit it and leaned back.

“You know, there are two types of people who come in here wanting to buy a gun. There are people like our friend Stefán,” he gestured to the front door. “They like to wave it around like little boys with their dick in their hands. This is to show all the other little boys how big and tough they are. But when push comes to shove, that is all they are: little boys.”

He took another long drag of his cigarette, and I watched the ember flare up. The music had stopped.

“And then there are people who pull out the gun because they mean to use it. People who know what it is to hold a man’s life in their hands. Who are very valuable to have in my debt. People like you, mister McMorro...” He paused, almost caressing the word as it escaped his lips. “Killers.”

I silently cursed myself. How could I have been this stupid?

“That is my offer to you, Michael,” he stubbed the cigarette out on the table with a smug grin. “Can I call you Michael?”

I wanted to reach across the table and rip him to shreds. I was acutely aware that the atmosphere inside the bar had shifted. The three men behind me were now following every word, each of them ready to pounce if I so much as sneezed in their boss’ direction. My nails dug into my thighs, and I knew the answer before I even asked. “And what if I say no?”

“Well,” Ari looked towards the three men, who I could hear set their drinks down and stand up, and he shrugged. “It’s not like you have a wife at home who’s going to miss you.”

I stared into his eyes, and I saw death.

And in a small bar in the frozen north, I sold my soul to the devil.

* * *

I stepped out into the cold, the gun tucked into the waist of my pants. It had been a long time since I felt that weight tugging at me, and I did not remember it feeling so heavy. One of Ari’s goons had taken me out back and shown me a selection of weapons laid out in the back of a delivery truck; everything from easily concealed revolvers to impractically bulky shotguns. The thug handed me a pair of disposable gloves, so that I would not leave my fingerprints on a treasure chest full of illegal

weapons, which I stretched onto my hands before delving into the arsenal. It occurred to me as I inspected the weapons, holding them in my hand and staring down their sights, that if Ari Gunnar decided to become king of Iceland, there was little anyone could do to stop him.

I finally decided on the relatively lightweight .40 calibre Smith & Wesson M&P, a pitch-black polymer framed pistol, with a four inch barrel and weighing roughly twenty-four ounces. Like the rest of the weapons, the gun had had its serial number filed off. It held fifteen rounds, plus one in the chamber, and I figured that would be enough for what I had in mind. I loaded it and felt it become heavier with each bullet I put in, and when I was done my chaperone followed me back inside. I strode past Ari, still sitting in his corner booth smoking what had to be his fifth cigarette in fifteen minutes.

“Congratulations on your purchase,” he said, and I could practically hear his lips curl into a grin. “I’ll be seeing you soon, Mikey.”

I ignored him, walking past the two thugs at the bar without looking at them. I could already feel the strings attached begin to coil around my neck, and if I didn’t get out I would choke right then and there. I stood outside and let the winds dance around me. I took a deep breath, the cold air hurting my lungs, in an effort to vacate the smoke out of my lungs. My body was shaking and I felt sick to my stomach.

“I thought you were staying out of trouble.”

I looked up and saw Ólafur, rising out of his car and shuffling towards me. His hands were stuffed into the pockets of a long, brown coat and he still wore that god-awful tie. I was beginning to think he was born with it.

“Ólafur,” I stood up straight and forced my body to calm down, my stomach settling uneasily. “I appreciate the thought, but I don’t need a ride home.”

He smiled as he came to a stop a few feet away from me. I noticed a small cut on his neck, and specks of blood stained the collar of his white shirt. I asked, “You cut yourself shaving?”

He touched a finger lightly to the wound and sighed. “Yeah, hands aren’t as steady as they used to be.”

“You know,” I said, putting my own cold hands in my jacket pockets. “If I didn’t know any better I’d think you were following me.”

“Don’t flatter yourself.” Ólafur looked up at the sign hanging above entrance to the bar, slowly scanning the entire exterior. “Imagine my surprise when I get a call from an officer on stakeout, stating that he just saw Michael McMorrow entering a bar operated by the most dangerous crime kingpin in Reykjavík.”

He pulled one hand out of his coat and theatrically raised a finger. “A kingpin, I might add, whose main enforcer you beat the shit out of not one week ago,” he added, his hand dropping down to his side and his face grim. “I felt somewhat curious, you understand.”

For the second time that night, I silently cursed my own stupidity. My hunt for Elías was messing with my mind, making me rash and sloppy. When I first met Ólafur, he told me the police had been trying to get Ari and his gang for a long time; of course they would be staking out the bar. I wondered if Ari Gunnar himself knew of the officers watching his every move, and decided I hoped he did not. I thought of the gun at my waist, and wondered how closely Ólafur’s men were watching the bar.

“A man can’t grab a beer on a cold evening?” I said, gambling on the answer being “not closely enough”.

Ólafur looked at me, not a hint of amusement on his face. Despite his taste in ties, he was no idiot. “I don’t know what you’re doing, Michael, and I figure I can’t do much to stop you. But I do know that if you get into bed with the people in that bar, you could just as well put a gun in your own mouth and pull the trigger.”

He took a step closer, his face softening with a hint of concern. “Now, I can help you but I’m only going to ask you this one time. What are you not telling me?”

I wanted to tell him everything. That my wife’s death was not an accident, that she had been murdered in cold blood by a psychopath. I wanted to tell him that same man had kidnapped Ásta in some twisted attempt to prove I was something I wasn’t. I wanted to tell him that I felt a deep, burning anger like a fire in the pit of my soul. That I was going to find that man, hunt him down like an animal, and be the last thing he ever saw. I was going to inflict my pain on him and look into his eyes as he bled out in the snow. I wanted to tell him that, more so than anger, I felt fear. Of what I had just done, of what I was about to do. And that I would not be able to stop.

“Like I said, just getting a beer.”

I could see the disappointment, yet complete lack of surprise, in his eyes. Again he looked to the bar, and I saw the same kind of anger in him. He looked back to me and nodded ruefully. “If that’s how you want to play it.”

I stood there as he turned and walked back to his car, giving me one last look before getting in and driving off. When I was sure he was gone, I reached back and secured the gun before heading off in the opposite direction, where I had parked my car.

I walked for a few minutes, the stainless steel of the gun cold against my back as my mind wandered. It felt as if everybody in the country was watching me; Ólafur would no doubt be keeping an eye on me from now, and with Ari Gunnar presumably wanting to watch over his investment, and the hordes of reporters hunting me down like bloodhounds, it made it seem impossible to stay under the radar. Then there was Elías, whose presence I felt in every waking moment. I glanced at every shadow, looked down every alley, for I felt his eyes on me wherever I went.

I stopped suddenly as I remembered María, who I had hoped would have some information for me by now. One hand grabbed my phone tight and pulled it up, pressing a small button on the side and bringing it to life. The display fired up with a bright light that I was not prepared for; I turned the phone away as it sang its tune and finished its activation process. When I turned the phone back and looked at the screen, a message alerted me to three missed calls. They were all from María, made two minutes apart, over forty minutes earlier. I went to call her back but noticed the small envelope icon at the top of the screen, telling me I had an unread message. I hurriedly clicked to it, and learned it was a voice message, also from María. I was never what you would call a tech savvy person, so it took me a minute before getting the recording to play.

“Michael, this is María,” her voice came through the speaker in panicked gasps. She sounded as if she had been running. “Listen, I found something, it’s about Elías. You have to contact me as soon as you get this.” She was obviously frightened, her message to me interspersed with Icelandic curse words. “I got stupid, so stupid,” she cursed again. “He knows I was looking into him. He’s coming after me, Michael.”

I was running towards my car, the phone pressed against my ear.

“I’m calling the cops now, but you have to know that he...”

She was cut off by a loud crashing sound, like a wooden door exploding into a thousand pieces. She screamed, and it pierced my ear like a knife. I stopped, my breathing heavy and my heart pounding, as the line went dead.

“FUCK!” I quickly entered her number, almost fumbling the phone, and pressed dial. I stood, impatiently turning and looking in each direction as if I would find help hidden in the dark corners of the city. The phone rang, and rang.

Then, just as I was about to hang up and call Ólafur, the phone was answered.

“María?” I called. “María, are you there?”

The line was silent for only a few heartbeats, and then he spoke.

“María can’t come to the phone right now,” he said, taking such a delight in her name that it sounded unnatural.

“You son of a bitch.”

“She should not have interfered, Michael.” He talked like an adult trying to reason with a child. “This is a family matter.”

“What did you do to her, Elías,” I gripped the phone tight, almost breaking it in my hand. “What did you do?”

He chuckled. “My dear stone giant, always so worried about the little people.”

“Tell me what you’ve done to her, you psychotic piece of shit.” I growled through gritted teeth.

“She is no longer any of your concern, Michael,” he said, as if was reprimanding me. “If you wanted to meet me so bad, you should have just said so. There was no need to involve a mortal, brother.”

I was pacing back and forth, my inability to do anything to help María driving me insane. I had sent her after him. She had gone poking around in dark corners, uncovering secrets that should have stayed buried, and her actions had alerted Elías; like a decrepit spider sensing prey in its web. She was going to die, and her blood would be on my hands.

“Don’t,” I shouted. “Don’t hurt her.”

The line went silent, and for a moment I feared he had hung up.

“Will you let me help you remember?” he asked.

I thought of Karen. I thought of Ásta.

No more.

“Yes.”

Chapter 11

Elías told me where I could find him, had given me instructions and said that if I did not come alone, the last thing María would see was him eating her own beating heart. He gave me the name of a restaurant and equestrian centre that was located 30 minutes outside Reykjavík. I drove with nothing but my own thoughts and the roaring engine breaking the silence. As I drove, the city lights became fewer and fewer, until I had left the brightness and warmth of civilization and entered the wild darkness beyond. Only the headlights of my car pierced the black, the silhouettes of mountains and hills zipping past me as I pushed my foot down on the gas pedal. Even the moon took shelter behind impenetrable clouds. The Smith & Wesson lay still in the seat next to me, and I could feel the bullet waiting in its cavernous mouth, trembling in anticipation of what was to come.

I had been driving for roughly twenty-five minutes when I saw it; a single-story building in the distance, shining alone in the darkness as if it had been dropped from space. I eased my foot off the pedal, the car slowing to a crawl, as I peered at the lights ahead. On the side of the road was a weather-beaten sign, and as I rolled past I recognized the name as the same Elías had given me. I stopped the car and squeezed the steering wheel so hard my knuckles went white.

He was there.

I could feel him in there, waiting for me.

I took a breath and looked over at the gun. I reached for it, feeling its weight in my hand once again. I had taken a life before and it had almost killed me.

This time, I was already dead.

* * *

After making one last phone call, I took a right off the highway and onto a dirt road, my car shaking and bumping across the loose and uneven soil. I drew nearer to the building, inspecting it closely as I came to a halt just outside. It only had one floor but was deceptively large; to the right of the main entrance was a restaurant dotted with booths and tables, and to the left was a souvenir shop. Every single light was on but I saw no one inside.

I grabbed the pistol and cocked it, the sound like the voice of an old friend. I turned the key and removed it from the ignition, and the car sputtered before going silent. I grabbed my phone from the passenger's seat and set it on the dashboard. I took a deep breath, and prayed to whatever god would listen that my plan would work.

I stepped out of the car, pebbles crunching beneath my feet as the wind howled around me. I carefully closed the door and shifted the gun to my right hand, before slowly approaching the building. I inspected each window, looking for any sign of movement, but the entire place was eerily still. I walked from each side of the building to the other, staring in through the windows at the empty restaurant and the souvenir shop, where I only saw mannequins frozen in place, their blank faces beckoning me to enter.

I finally headed for the main entrance. As I expected, it was unlocked; I reached down and pushed it open, and was immediately welcomed by warmth and the faint scent of horses. I walked past the lobby, where paintings of the strongly built beasts hung on each side, towards a small bar that stood at the centre of the main area. The only sound came from the creaking floorboards beneath me, and I looked to each side, to the restaurant and souvenir shop, before looking straight ahead at the large, double entrance next to the bar. Two signs hung on the wall, one on each side of the doors and both of them in English; one proudly proclaimed the Icelandic horse to be one of the most beautiful creatures in the world, while the other urged guests to enter and see the beasts in action. I gripped the handle of the gun, instinctively glancing down as if to make sure it had not vanished from my hand, before inching towards the doors and pushing them open.

I stepped into total darkness.

The doors slowly closed behind me, one meeting the other with a loud bang that shut out the light from outside. I stood in the void while my eyes adjusted, and once they did, I ventured forth. Directly ahead of me were several concrete steps that I climbed cautiously, emerging into an expansive set of bleachers. Rows of benches and seats were arranged all around me, facing out into the black. This was where tourists and other spectators would watch as the horses galloped back and forth on the track that was shrouded in shadows beyond. I carefully inched down each row, until I stood at the

fence separating the observers from the observed. I could not see anything out there, and I nervously raised the gun.

With no warning, a light burst to life on the field, bringing it into view. Fire erupted from a large barrel at the centre of the arena, its flames dancing hauntingly in the dark. I could not see how large the stadium was; it seemed to be the length of a football field, but only half as wide. The entire ground was covered in sand, and a massive screen hung on the opposite wall, where spectacular images of Iceland would enthral audiences. But the screen was black, just like everything else. In the middle, next to the barrel was a chair. Even from here I could see María's eyes, wide with fear. Her hands were tied behind her back, a large piece of tape covering her mouth. Each of her legs was fastened to the chair, and she pulled away from the barrel as the flames licked her cheek.

Directly behind her, like the darkness itself brought to life, stood Elías. He was staring up at me, shadows dancing across his face and blurring his features. His bald head gleamed, his crooked nose seemingly shifting with each pulse of the fire. Like a bolt of lightning, the pain returned to my stomach and I almost collapsed. I clutched my torso with my free hand, raising the gun in their direction. In his long, skeletal fingers, Elías held a knife pressed against María's throat.

I aimed the gun directly at him, my finger on the trigger.

"Please," he called out, his voice echoing in the void. "Even if you hit me from there, she would still bleed out in the sand."

I did not lower the gun, but the pain was making my entire body shake, the barrel dancing wildly through the air.

"And we all know you love your mortals," he said, looking down at María. He smiled, like a child would before it plucked the legs off a spider. He brought his other hand up to María's face, his bony fingers grazing her skin. She flinched, as if his touch was toxic.

"Let her go, Elías." I shouted down at him. "This is between you and me."

"It is, isn't it?" he said. "But, I've rather grown fond of my new plaything."

His hand moved an inch, the blade digging into María's flesh and her muffled screams filled the auditorium.

“God damn it, stop!” I screamed, and as my abdomen tensed the pain shot throughout my entire body.

Elías went still, never taking his eyes off me. “Come, join us.”

I glanced to my left at a small set of stairs leading down into the arena, and sidestepped over to it. Still my gun was raised, pointed at Elías, who followed my every move. I stepped down until my feet hit the sand.

“You’ve surprised me so much, Michael.” Elías said, as I slowly walked towards him, the sand shifting under my weight and making it even more difficult to maintain my aim. “I had been looking for you and the others for so long. I never imagined that you had found each other first.”

I stopped, a few feet away from them. Tears streamed down María’s face as she struggled hopelessly against her bonds. Blood trickled down her neck where Elías had cut her, and the fire roared beside them. “Of course, it made sense. You and the eagle always did have a connection.”

“You’re insane.” I said, my voice dripping with contempt. Beads of sweat had begun to form on my face, but I had never felt so cold.

Elías flinched almost imperceptibly. “That’s what you said last time. I am not insane.” He sighed, before gripping his blade tight. “You just have to remember.”

The gun was heavy, and my arm had begun to ache. It lowered an inch, but I took a deep breath and raised it again.

“You just have to remember, and you can be with her again,” he said with a smile on his face and conviction in his words.

“No.” I spoke through a clenched jaw. “You killed her. You took her away from me.”

“You see, that...” he said, pointing a scrawny finger at me. “That anger, that rage...that is why I did not believe you were the giant, at first. You were never like that before.

“But after I saw that video, I read about you. About what you had done in America. That was when I knew I had to meet you, and when I did...” He shook his head sadly. “When I saw the pain in your eyes, it all became clear. My test for you only proved me right; you are the stone giant. You are the protector. You think you met your wife by chance, Michael? It was destiny.

“You found each other because we always find each other. Again and again, throughout eternity, we will always find each other. Things might get in our way, sometimes,” he looked down to María, poking the dagger into her skin again and sending a fresh stream of blood down her shirt as she cried out, “but we will always be together.”

He looked back to me, and in his eyes I saw a sort of desperation, a pleading. “You found each other and you came here, because this is where you belong. This is your birthplace.”

“I’m sorry to burst your bubble,” I said, the sweat stinging my eyes. “But I was born in Queens.”

Elías chuckled. “And yet you feel more at home here, don’t you? It is why you never went back, even after her death. It is why you would rather languish here than go back to that cesspool you call home. No.” He smiled. “This is your home. Your true home.”

I had begun to shake, the pain in my gut making it hard to see, and every inch I moved almost sent me to my knees. The gun shook in my hand, and I was covered in sweat.

“We do not have much time, Michael. We have to find the others, and save this country. It is what we are meant to do!” He shouted, and the emptiness of the arena echoed his words back at us tenfold.

“What...?” I coughed, the words catching in my throat. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“They’re destroying our home!” He screamed, and the veins in his neck looked like they would explode. “They flock here, by the thousands, taking and using and ruining! And the greedy, lecherous parasites who call this place home crawl over each other to build their repugnant hotels, paving over everything they see. We have to stop them! I have to stop th-”

Elías stopped and inspected me, tilting his head and looking at me like I was a wounded animal. He shook his head solemnly. “You still don’t understand, do you?”

He leaned forward, his hand pressing the knife against María’s throat, steady as a rock. “The dreams? That crippling pain in your stomach?”

He laughed, and it shot through me like a dagger. “You’re remembering.”

My legs buckled, and I fell to my knees. I gasped for air as I clutched my stomach with one hand, the other slowly falling. The pain had spread through my body like a wave, and I had never felt anything as excruciating in my life.

“It’s okay, Michael, this is the hard part.” He smiled, nodding enthusiastically. “You just have to fight through it.”

I retched, and the bile burned my throat as it splashed onto the sand. Elías moved away from María but immediately took a step back, unable to contain his excitement. “This is your body coming to terms with everything you’ve been through.”

I forced my body forward, planting one foot firmly in the sand. I breathed in.

“I am sorry, by the way.” Elías motioned towards my stomach. “When you were in the professor’s body I meant to kill you quickly, so that you could be released without pain. But he was stronger than he looked and, oh, how he struggled.”

With all the strength I could muster, I launched myself to my feet. My body swayed, and I wiped the sweat from my eyes with the sleeve of my jacket.

“You know what, Elías?” I said, my breathing heavy and laboured. “I don’t care what you believe. You are going to die for what you’ve done.”

“And I will be reborn.” Elías said, his voice unwavering in its faith.

We stood there, in the flickering light of the fire, for what felt like an eternity. He did not speak, for he had said all he wanted to say. There was only the soft crackle of the fire, and the shadows frantically moving around us. We both knew it was time.

“I’ll see you soon, brother,” he said, as he closed his eyes and smiled.

His hand moved and the knife began its journey across María’s throat. She screamed out in pain. Before I even realized it, my brain sent the message down into my body; my grip on the pistol tightened and my finger squeezed the trigger.

There was a thunderous explosion, and a bright flash of light.

Elías stumbled backwards as the bullet slammed into his chest. He stood there for a moment, as if his body was desperately trying to make sense of what had just happened. He looked at me, as blood, thick and black as oil, began pooling underneath his shirt. In the blink of an eye his body went limp and he fell to the ground, making almost no sound as it hit the sand.

María had screamed in shock when the gun went off. Her eyes were shut tight, her muscles tensed in fear, as she shivered violently in the chair. I ran over to her,

checking her wounds. The knife had only just punctured her skin when I fired, and while blood trickled from the wound, Elías had not managed to sever any arteries.

“It’s okay, it’s okay.” I gently pressed my hand against her cheek, before stepping away from her and over to where Elías lay.

He was on his back, his wiry limbs splayed out like the branches of a decrepit tree. Blood flowed freely from the gaping hole in his chest, and had begun pooling underneath him. He stared up at me: a mixture of complete agony and fear on his face. He gasped for air, but it would not come to him; he choked and coughed, blood erupting from his mouth. He had believed himself to be a god; an almighty dragon, immortal and terrifying. He was none of those things, in the end, and a bullet would kill him same as any other.

“You’re not a dragon,” I said, staring into his pleading eyes. “You will not be reborn. That pain you’re feeling right now?”

He choked again, and tears began running down his face and mixing with the blood. He did not understand.

“That’s all you have left.” I lifted the gun and, with another explosion and flash of light, shot him in the head.

I turned back to María, who had begun desperately pulling at the ropes tying her in place. I threw the gun away and it disappeared into the darkness with soft thud, as I hurriedly knelt by her side and began working at the knots.

“It’s okay, María, it’s over,” I said, but she could not hear me over the sound of her own sobs. Her life, like so many lives, had been destroyed because of me, and I would never forgive myself. I could only hope that they would find some comfort in knowing that the man who had taken them, hurt them, was no longer lurking in the shadows. I could only hope that they would sleep better at night, knowing he was buried and, in time, forgotten. And I could only hope Karen would, finally, find the peace I never would.

I worked at the knots and finally freed her legs, and her arms a few seconds later. She reached up and ripped the tape off her mouth, letting out a painful scream as she fell out of her chair. I grabbed her by the shoulders.

“It’s okay, come on, let’s get you home,” I said, gently helping her to her feet. She was unstable and her knees buckled, but I held onto her and helped her take each fragile step.

“No,” she gasped, “wait...”

“María we have to go, we have to get you to the hospital.”

She stopped, grabbing my hand and squeezing it tight. “No, Elías...”

“Elías is dead, María, I shot him.” I grabbed her tight, trying to lead her towards the bleachers. “You’re safe.”

She shook her head, planting her feet and pushing my hands off her shoulder. “No, no, I have to tell you...about Elías...”

Her breathing was heavy and she was in shock; her entire body shook and her face was white as snow. “What about him?” I asked.

“Elías...” she said, regaining some semblance of strength and stability. “Elías was not the dragon.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “What? Then wh-”

The knife slid in between my ribs, and a pain unlike any I had ever felt shot through my entire body. I collapsed to my knees and clutched my side, as warm blood cascaded out of the wound and down my body. I looked up and whoever I had known as María was gone; the person standing before me was something else entirely. She seemed bigger, somehow, and she had stopped shaking. She sighed, wiping the tear-stained makeup from her face as she twirled a small, shining blade between her fingers.

“He talked way too much.” María stepped towards me, slamming her foot into my chest and sending me flying onto my back. I screamed out in pain, blood gushing from my side. “A time-out will do him good.”

She hovered above me and, in the darkness, I saw great, mighty wings. I could feel myself rapidly losing blood, as my vision began to blur and it became harder to move.

“But I’m still mad at you, Michael.” She knelt down and grabbed me by the lapel, pulling me up so that I was inches away from her face. Her eyes burned with rage and I smelled smoke. “It’ll take me months to find him again.”

She turned the knife in her hand and, with a roar, brought the handle down into the side of my head. For a second, everything went black and the pain paralyzed me.

With one hand she grabbed my face, the other pushing the knife against the skin under my eye.

“I knew from the moment I met you, you were never going to remember who you really are.” The knife dug into my face, a stream of blood running down into my ear. “But Elías was so sure you would join us, he begged me to let him help you.”

María got up, wiping the knife on her own shirt, streaks of my blood staining the cloth. She looked over to Elías’ body and let out a sigh. “The bull never is too smart.”

I was close now. I could feel it; I could not move, I could hardly see. The darkness was getting closer, its tendrils wrapping around me and pulling me in. Small, cold hands grabbed hold of me, and I heard them whisper.

“I really should have just killed you in the harbour, saved us all some time.” María stared down at me, as if she was examining a deer that had been hit by a truck. She glanced at the knife, smiling as it shone in the darkness. Once again she hovered over me, before dropping down to her knees and straddling my body.

The pain was almost gone now and I could sense her, out there, at the edges of the shadows, waiting for me. I could smell her, and it filled me with warmth.

“Oh, do me a favour and be Icelandic next time,” María said as she grabbed the knife with both hands and raised it above her head. “I fucking hate speaking English.”

I closed my eyes.

I was ready.

A deafening explosion rocked me awake, and for a moment I thought I had been shot. I looked up and saw María, towering over me, her eyes wide in shock. Blood poured from the hole in her throat, and all I could smell was burnt flesh. Her hands dropped to her sides, the knife falling from her grip and into the sand. Her body lurched forward and collapsed on top of me with like a sack of flour.

I heard footsteps in the sand, and a familiar voice calling out to me.

I felt hands grabbing hold of me, trying to shake me away.

But it was okay.

I was ready.

Epilogue

In the end, I did not see Karen.

I did not see a bright light, or a tunnel, or pearly gates.

All I saw was that damn tie.

In the minutes before I walked into the building that night, I had called Ólafur and told him everything. I told him about Elías and his involvement with my wife's death and Ásta's disappearance, and I told him what I planned to do. I knew that the drive would take him roughly half an hour if he hurried and I felt confident that he would. He had arrived to see María about to kill me and, noticing my gun in the sand, had shot her dead. Ólafur had never killed anyone before, and he had a hard time dealing with the aftermath. He visited me in the hospital and told me he was taking a long holiday, and that he was not sure he would come back. He did not look too good, which I joked about, but I am worried about him. They say a bullet always destroys two lives; that of its victim, and of its shooter.

I suppose it does.

I was in the hospital for a couple of weeks. When Ólafur brought me in I had lost so much blood that the doctors told him there was almost no chance I would survive. As I learned later, the interns actually had a bet going to see if I would make it. When I finally woke up, three days later, some of them lost quite a bit of money, but I was never one for playing the odds. I felt like I should have at least gotten a cut of the action, but I made do with walking out of there alive.

Frikki visited me almost every day. I will never forget the look on his face when I told him Karen had been murdered. It was as if I reached into his heart and ripped open a wound that had barely started healing. He did not visit me for a while after that, but eventually came back. He told me learning the truth was like losing her a second time. I knew how he felt.

Halla visited me a few times, but only once did she bring Ásta. The girl did not feel comfortable meeting me, and I did not blame her. I had become a reminder of horrible things to a lot of people, and I wanted her, most of all, to move on with her life.

The media had a field day, of course. It would take a few weeks before I stopped seeing pictures of me, Elías or María in the papers. They were dubbed the "land

wight killers” by the trashier journalists, but people love a catchy title so it stuck. I refused all interviews, and before long they stopped asking. I doubt they minded, as their version of the truth was considerably more action packed. I think I read something about a car chase at some point.

I still have the scar; the doctors told me it will never heal completely. I will carry it with me forever, a constant reminder of what happened. It doesn’t hurt so much anymore. I haven’t felt the pain in my stomach since that night; the doctors had no idea what could have caused it. They said their best guess was that the stress had given me a minor ulcer, but their scans turned up clean. Even though I try not to, I sometimes can’t help but think about what Elías said.

I tell myself he was insane, delusional. It works, more often than not.

I don’t drink as much as I used to, but I suppose that was a long time coming. Karen does not come to me as often as she used to, but when she does I hold her in my arms and we talk.

I think I’ll drive out of the city, see if I can spot some northern lights.

It’s snowing, but I don’t mind.

Writing *I See Fire*

By Bjarki Dagur Svanþórsson

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Introduction

Wanting to write, and actually sitting down to do it are two entirely different things. One does not always beget the other, and so it was that I had always wanted to write (having made many attempts at it throughout the years) but never had the patience or discipline to do so. Like most people, I had spent countless hours making up stories in my head; worlds within worlds, filled to the brim with characters both human and not, mapping out entire timelines of events that would forever alter the course of my figments' lives. That is, of course, until I sat down and stared at the empty page, at which point entire universes were extinguished, much like my enthusiasm in the project. The existence of this final assignment is, therefore, entirely due to Anna Heiða Pálsdóttir, my supervisor. To her I am eternally grateful, for having inspired me to write; for not only telling me that I could, but that I should, and for setting me on the course I intend to stay on, rain or shine.

Like most people who try their hand at what they truly love, I can remember the exact moment I began my journey; the moment I felt a spark within me that would one day grow into a flame. I was 10 years old and had gone to see Sam Raimi's film *Spider-Man* at a local theatre. As the young woman in the booth handed me my ticket, she also gave me a complimentary comic book. It was the first issue of Brian Michael Bendis' seminal run on *Ultimate Spider-Man*, a series that aimed to modernize the character, in an attempt to attract a new generation of readers.

It worked.

I must have read that single issue a hundred times before it fell apart in my hands, every page fraying at the ages and the colors pale ghosts of their former selves. Every time I reached the last page, the same three words, written in large yellow letters, taunted me: To be continued. I absolutely, positively had to know what happened next. So began my lifelong love affair with superhero fiction. Like any good love, it entralls and infuriates me at the same time, and no matter how long I go without reading an issue, I always come back to them eventually.

I was alone among my friends in my appreciation for super-powered beings in capes, and so I took to the internet in search of likeminded individuals. What I found was an internet forum, where I would spend most of my time as a teenager, consisting

of several fans who would write in a style dubbed co-operative fan fiction. Each member of the community would write a single character of their own choice, and embark upon their own adventures or share in larger arcs with other writers. After an evening spent reading what others had written, I had decided: I want to do that.

So I began, taking notes of what worked and what did not, what methods suited me, and how I could make the most of what I had. Writing those short stories remains one of my fondest memories but, as with such things, it fell by the wayside and, until my correspondence with Anna Heiða, I would not write for a long time.

This is all a long-winded way of telling you that the story you hold in your hands has been a long time coming. In the following essay, I hope to show you how it came to be, how it went from an idea to a living, breathing thing, and the trials I went through as a fledgling writer. It is, as you will discover, inspired by many different people in many different ways; a novella about loss and anger and purpose. It is most certainly a labor of love, and it is, I hope, just the beginning.

Chapter Two: The Plot

Even if you manage to create the most wonderfully compelling and complex characters to be put to print, they will only take you so far if you do not give them anything to do. After all, the most interesting characters in the world are not very interesting if nothing ever happens to them. So the plot is, to put it mildly, somewhat important. But not every writer approaches the plot in the same fashion. As best-selling author Jeffery Deaver, who is renowned for his painstaking plotting, said: “The writing world is divided into two camps, those who outline and those who don’t.” (Phillips). Neither side is right or wrong, as he goes on to explain; whatever works for the writer in question is the correct method for him to write. For me, and this story, the answer is found somewhere in between, although I did not discover this until late in the process.

The first several days of this project were spent meticulously planning every detail of the story, from beginning to end. I outlined every move I intended Michael to make from chapter to chapter, with every detail scribbled down in my notepad like the ramblings of a mad man. This strict structuring worked for Deaver, whose books I had thoroughly enjoyed, so I felt it would be the right method for me. Not quite, as I would soon discover. When I began writing the story itself, something strange happened. I could feel it changing; it shifted and buckled, and before long it had begun breaking the shackles I had foolishly placed it in. I began writing not what I felt *should* happen, but what I thought *would* happen. The outline became a guideline; these were the things that happened to my characters, and it was up to them how they would react. I discovered that the plot was out of my characters’ control, whereas the story was not.

The plot, or premise, of the story remained the same throughout the process, while the details and circumstances changed numerous times. It was always to be a story about a man who had lost someone he could not live without, and how he kept on living anyway. I have always been drawn to characters that have suffered a loss, ever since losing my own mother to cancer at the age of twelve. Through my correspondence with my supervisor, I learned that the plot I had in mind was one of Ronald B. Tobias’ “master plots”, from his book *20 master plots (and how to build them)*. This type of plot, dubbed “wretched excess”, deals with characters that live normal lives, but are dealt an unexpected blow that sends them to the margins of society and acceptable

behavior. This is indeed where Michael McMorrow finds himself at the start of my story, having lost his wife in a tragic car accident.

Likewise, it would always be the kidnapping of a young girl that forced Michael back from the edge. Initially I had only planned on the girl, who would later become Ásta, to be a runaway whose parents believed she had been kidnapped. But as I wrote on I realized Michael was in a dark place not many escape from. It would take something close to home, something personal, for him to take action. And so the girl became Karen's niece, in plot alteration that served to make the writing process a bit more convenient, as well as strengthen Michael's resolve and motive.

The character of Elías, and his involvement with Karen's death, was similarly planned and I did not deviate much from my original vision of his relationship with Michael. However, I had originally meant to explore the villain's backstory further, and the identity of his accomplice was a source of frustration for me. In my original outlines, María was not the one working with Elías, who at that time was meant to be the dragon, as Michael assumes he is until the truth is revealed in the final chapter. Instead, I had created the character of Jóhanna, whom I later scrapped, who was to be the widow of the professor Elías kills some months prior to the beginning of the story. The reader would discover that Elías had been a patient at a psychiatric institution when he was a teenager, after having murdered his sibling. Jóhanna would have been a nurse there at the time, and the two had fallen in love and shared in their delusions. The remnants of this plotline can be seen in the references to the professor's murder. This remains the largest alteration I made to the plot itself, and one I still struggle with. However, as the deadline approached and I could not find a way to introduce Jóhanna and her relationship to Elías without the story's pacing suffering, I opted to go with the more streamlined version of events.

Another example of the characters dictating the flow of the story can be found towards the end of the novella, when Michael makes a failed attempt to purchase a gun from a gang boss. I originally envisioned Ari Gunnar as a one-note character, someone who would facilitate the plot and get a gun into Michael's hands. But as I introduced him, he became much more than I had intended him to be, and he altered the course of the story, albeit slightly. Instead of simply selling Michael the gun, Ari Gunnar forces him to cross a line; Michael certainly got what he wanted, but so did the criminal

kingpin. In Michael's mind, killing Elías is right and it is just. However, there is nothing right about striking a deal with a violent, evil crime boss for a chance at revenge. So, a scene that was originally meant to get Michael from point A to point B, forced him to stop and think if he was taking the right route. That scene, in my mind, is the perfect example of how a story can be changed for the better, all because of a character who refuses to be dictated by an outline. Michael's debt to Ari Gunnar is a thread I purposely left dangling, and one I am interested in returning to should I get the chance to write further stories about Mike.

Chapter Three: Characters

At the head of this assignment is a short text that describes the premise of the story much like a blurb on the back of a paperback novel would. These blurbs are, often, interesting enough that they lead people to read the story. Telling people what happens is easy enough, but once they start reading you have to make them *care* that it is happening, why it is happening, and to whom. A great character can save a poor story, but the opposite cannot be said to be true. Creating a character that people will care about, sympathize with and actively want to read about is an incredibly difficult process. Whether or not I was successful is up to the reader.

I had a relatively clear image of Michael McMorrow from the start. He is an amalgamation of some of my favorite detectives and P.I.s in popular crime fiction, with hints of Jeffery Deaver's Amelia Sachs and Michael Connelly's Harry Bosch. The biggest inspiration for the character, however, as well as this entire novella is the works of John Connolly. An Irish-born writer and journalist, Connolly is best known for his series of novels featuring private investigator Charlie Parker, which began with 1999's *Every Dead Thing*. The character I created was meant to be a good, kind-hearted man with a very strict sense of right and wrong. But he is, above all else, a tragically conflicted character. Much like the character of Charlie Parker, Michael has done horrible things in the name of justice, even going so far as to break the law he once upheld. Michael's past, which was glimpsed in the novella, haunts him to this day, having almost broken him completely. He suffers tremendous guilt for having been too late to save two young boys, who had been kidnapped during his time with the New York City Police Department. His cold blooded murder of their kidnapper troubles him further, as it saw him crossing a line he thought he could never cross; a line he is forced to cross yet again in cold dark of Iceland. The loss of his wife sends him careening into the pit of despair and self-loathing we find him in, and that he seems to be climbing out of during the epilogue. He is a flawed man with a broken heart, but he is essentially good – even though he himself would not see it that way.

The decision to tell this story in the first person comes from my days writing superhero fan fiction. I tried several different types of writing for each of the characters I worked with, but I always came back to the first person view, and consider it my

strongest. The style allows me to get inside the head of my protagonist in a more personal way than the third person narrative allows for. I felt this was important in the case of Michael, as his state of mind is what gives the story its tone.

I went through several different names before landing on the last name of McMorrow. It is an Irish name, which I felt was appropriate due to his upbringing in New York, and means ‘sea warrior’. Although the meaning itself is not reflected or referenced in the story, I felt it was similarly appropriate due to his battle with Elías, and the repeated imagery of a fire-breathing dragon. When it came to his first name, it was an easy pick; a staple of superhero fiction is the alliteration of names. For example; Peter Parker, Matthew Murdock, Bruce Banner. It is a practice that makes a name ‘pop’, so to speak, roll off the tongue and stick in a reader’s mind. And so, Michael McMorrow was born.

The main antagonist of the piece, Elías, was similarly clear in my mind as I created the outline for the story. I wanted to create a character whose physicality belied his true nature. Thus, the man who the reader believes to be the hulking monstrosity that Michael dreams of, is trapped in a frail body. The revelation that Elías’ avatar was the bull all along does not diminish this effect, as the bull is similarly large and muscular. It was my attempt at misdirection to have Elías display certain characteristics one would attach to a dragon; he dressed lightly in the dead of winter, as if the cold winds had no effect on him, he seemed to be continually sweating, and the stench of smoke hung around him. These were all things I had planned on when developing the character, and they all made it to the finished novella mostly unchanged.

While Michael and Elías were, for the most part, fully formed by the time I put pen to paper, the same cannot be said for some of the supporting cast. Originally, Ólafur’s first scene was intended to be his only one. When I realized there was more to him than a single expository sequence at the very start of the novella, he went through several incarnations before he became the character you see in the story. A kind, world-weary man, it was my intention that Ólafur be the lifeline that Michael repeatedly misses throughout his hunt for Elías. The hideous tie that Ólafur wears, and Michael repeatedly shows his disdain of, was meant to serve as a sort of symbolic representation of this lifeline. During every one of their meetings, Michael is in a situation where telling Ólafur the truth would be the right choice, but anger clouds his judgment and it is

only at the very last moment that he grabs hold, and is pulled back from the brink of death. Ólafur was not meant to play such a large role in the story, and he was certainly not meant to be the one who slays the dragon in the end. However, during their first meeting, Ólafur assures Michael that, were he faced with a situation like the one Michael faced in New York, he would have shot the kidnapper too. Michael merely nods and tells Ólafur that he hopes the detective never finds himself in that situation, and as soon as I remembered that exchange I knew that it would have to come full circle.

Another character that played a larger role than I had originally intended was, as I mentioned earlier, María. In my original outlines she was to be a ‘sidekick’ of sorts, helping Michael in his quest for revenge. I soon discovered that this was something Michael would do alone, that he would do his best to avoid putting others in harm’s way. That is, until, he opens the package left in his apartment and his world is turned upside down. As his anger boils over, Michael becomes consumed with hatred, and recruits María to assist him. When her original role was diminished, the character of María was in danger of being cut entirely, as I did not intend for her to become a romantic interest. I wrote the chapter in which she first appeared with the intention of rewriting it should I decide to cut her from the story. By the time I realized I would not be introducing the character of Jóhanna, the professor’s widow and Elías’ ally, I realized how perfectly she fit as the mysterious fourth landwight. I purposefully wrote the sequence in which Mike finds Ásta in a way that I did not reveal the kidnapper’s identity, and had the attacker charge at Michael, much like a bull, to serve as yet another red herring.

One of the most important factors in writing the story was to have Michael be all but alone in Iceland, at least in his own mind. He would, as the story went on, realize that even though his wife had died, he still had a family. Thus, his relationship with Frikki was meant to humanize my protagonist. Although Frikki made the journey from idea to character relatively unscathed, his role was significantly diminished as I began the writing process. Before I made the decision to have Ásta be related to Karen, I had intended for Frikki to be chief of police in Reykjavík, instead of a retired police officer. He would approach Michael for help with the kidnapping case, giving him access to files and information during his search for Elías. However, much like in

María's case, I felt it would undermine the feeling of isolation that I wanted both Michael and the reader to experience, until Frikki's confrontation with Michael later in the story.

Finally, the character of Karen changed somewhat throughout the writing process. My original intention was to have Karen only appear in dream sequences, growing more restless and disturbed as Elías' presence was felt more and more. For the first few drafts I was too stubborn to let the idea go, but as Anna Heiða rightly pointed out, many of the scenes relating Michael's relationship with his wife would be much more impactful if I delved into the flashback, giving both parties dialogue, and bestowing Karen with the voice she was so sorely missing. As it stands, her presence in the story is much more fleshed out than I had expected, and I am happy for it.

Chapter Four: Setting

Choosing the right setting for your story can be absolutely critical. It can distinguish a great story from a good one, and certain locations simply elevate the writing itself. The setting for *I See Fire* is, without a doubt, the most unique aspect of it. In hindsight, Iceland seems like the obvious choice, being eerily beautiful, cold, harsh and isolated. It was the perfect location, which makes it even more perplexing that for some time, Iceland was the furthest thing from my mind.

To be honest, I had never truly given much thought to where I would have the story take place. My mind immediately filled the gap with the United States, almost like a reflex, as that is where almost all the crime fiction I have ever read or watched takes place. For the first two weeks of development I was heavily inspired by Connolly's *Every Dead Thing*, the latter half of which takes place in the swamps of Louisiana, as well as two TV series; *Justified* and *True Detective*, both of which are set in the southern United States. I intended to use the heat and humidity of the southern states as a metaphor for the dragon. When I first made the switch to Iceland, I considered having the story take place during the summer, in order to preserve the symbolism. As I wrote on, however, I realized that the imagery offered by a country in the midst of the blackest of winters, could serve as a powerful counter-point to the imagery afforded to me by Elías. Furthermore, it was originally Elías, an Icelander from the start, who was to be the 'stranger in a strange land', not Michael. Moving the story to Iceland turned out to be correct choice, as it gave the antagonist the home-field advantage; making him an even bigger threat and furthering the themes of isolation and helplessness. This can most clearly be seen during the several moments when Michael must consult an Iceland website called *Já*, a popular site that offers clear directions to any part of the country. I initially used the site as a simple explanation as to how Michael finds his way around the city, having only lived there for several months. As you can see by reading the novella, it quickly became a key component in the search for Ásta, serving as both the final clue to her location as well the pathfinder I had intended it to be for Michael.

Of course, the moment I moved from the United States, as a setting, to Iceland, several key components of the story were altered. Some had to be rewritten, others cut completely, while new ones arose to take their place. One such component was the gun

that Michael gets from Ari Gunnar. Had the story taken place in America, the reader could almost have assumed that Michael owned a gun without me mentioning it. He was a policeman, after all, and it is quite common for ordinary citizens to own weapons such as the revolver he obtains. In Iceland, however, pistols are illegal, and thus the mere act of altering the setting of the story created an obstacle for the hero to overcome; an obstacle that, one could argue, becomes the most important decision Michael makes in the entire story.

Another such example comes in the form of Ásta. At the time of her kidnapping she has just turned eighteen years old, whereas I had originally planned to make her younger. This change also came from an aspect of the law in Iceland of which I was made aware during my research phase. If a person over the age of eighteen goes missing, and the police suspect that it was of their own accord (in cases where substance abuse is suspected or known), they often extend the period in which they do not begin their search to up to six days. As disheartening as that is, it solved a narrative problem I had been struggling with for some time; why would Michael be the only one looking for this missing girl? The police in the story dismiss Halla's pleas for help finding her daughter, citing her son's troublesome past and deciding Ásta had surely followed in his footsteps. It is, tragically, commonplace for troubled teens in Iceland to run away from home, with many repeat cases, to the point where it has almost become a sick joke among some members of the community. These teens usually surface in a few days, and so the police in my story are quite jaded and assume Ásta will return home before long. When Michael finds her, she has been missing for exactly three days. Had he not found her, effectively failing the test Elías set for him, Ásta would have been killed long before the police ever knocked down the door to the apartment.

Chapter Five: Dialogue

I want to briefly discuss my use of dialogue in *I See Fire*. Placing the story in Iceland meant that Michael would be the only character whose native language was not Icelandic. As such, language became yet another component in isolating Michael from his surroundings, rendering him incapable of understanding most of what people said around him. Of course, having already lived in Iceland for several months, and having been in a relationship with an Icelandic woman, he has picked up a few words and phrases throughout the years. However, there are several instances in the story where his inability to speak Icelandic, and some characters' inability to properly understand English, impacts his life, in ways both large and small.

Another troublesome aspect to the matter of language in the story came in the form of Rakel, the young girl who leads Michael to Ásta's computer and, eventually, Ásta herself. In Icelandic schools, English is a mandatory subject from the ages of eight to sixteen years. It has always been a subject at which I excelled and, coupled with years of consuming English-language media, I reached the proficiency of a native speaker of the language at an early age. This heavily impacted how I wrote dialogue, and it was not until my supervisor pointed it out to me, that I realized it was impacting the story negatively. All the supporting characters in the story display, more or less, the same level of decent English proficiency. As they are all adults who, it could be argued, would have to be able to read and write English as part of their professions, this did not present a problem. However, in the case of Rakel, I had a teenage girl who spoke the language fluently. As Anna Heiða pointed out, citing her own experiences as an English teacher, teenagers at Rakel's age very rarely speak fluent English. This led to me rewrite the entire chapter, severely altering the way in which the character spoke; her English became broken, hopefully creating a realistic representation of a young person who had no specific interest in learning English, having only picked it up from Western media. Upon discovering this tendency of mine to have my characters' English proficiency match my own, I went back and edited much of the dialogue. Another example of a character whose dialogue I altered to reflect what I had learned was the thug who Michael has several altercations with. Being a violent, degenerate criminal, I decided, did not necessitate an intimate knowledge of foreign languages.

This resulted in me honing my ability to imbue each of my characters, whether they are central to the story or largely insignificant, with a voice of their own. Looking back, it is the aspect of writing the story which proved the most challenging, and a skill that I most look forward to utilizing in the future.

Chapter Six: Research

A wise man, whether it was Mark Twain or not, once said: “Write what you know”. The research phase of this assignment was somewhat unorthodox, in that there were only a handful of scenes and sequences that required me to do research before I began writing. By and large, I sought information and inspiration from my own experiences, whether they were from my own knowledge of various subjects, or my life in Iceland. However, I will focus this brief chapter on the aspects of the story I did research, and detail my process.

The first issue I researched was the one I spent the most time researching. When creating the character of Michael, I set out a timeline of his career with the New York City Police Department. This meant searching for information on the police academy, age limits to the various departments of the NYPD, as well as realistic career trajectories within the force. The official website for the NYPD was extremely helpful in this, offering simple answers to the several questions I had in my mind. I also spent some time reading over their list of precincts in the state, eventually settling on the largest precinct in Queens, where I decided Michael would have grown up.

The second issue I researched was that of weapons and automobiles. Having little to no knowledge of the two, I spent some time reading about the various types of guns, handguns in particular, and cars I felt Michael would use. After choosing the car Michael would have brought over to Iceland, as well as the gun he would have chosen at Ari Gunnar’s bar, I set out to gather details on the two objects. Michael would have intimate knowledge of the vehicle and, as a former detective, would have at least passing knowledge of firearms. To this end, I gathered several images of the Chevy Nova, and visited the official website of Smith & Wesson gun manufacturer, both of which were immeasurably helpful. In the case of the weapons, with Smith & Wesson offering precise information and a wealth of photographs of the guns I intended to use for the story I was able to write about them as if I was holding them in my own hands.

The third, and final, aspect I researched was the equestrian center where the final confrontation between Michael and Elías takes place. It took me a long time to settle on a location for their last meeting and, for the better part of the writing process, I had planned to have Michael fight Elías at a shipyard. However, a few weeks before

writing the final chapter, I went on a work trip and ended up visiting an equestrian center outside of Reykjavík. As I walked into the arena, I was immediately struck by the ominous magnificence of it. I looked out from the stands and, after the show itself was over, stepped out onto the sand. I could see them, clear as day, standing in front of me; Michael and Elías, a raging fire between them. I took photos of every inch of the building, inside and out, and relied on them as I wrote.

Much of the rest of the story came from my own experiences, having lived in Iceland for my entire life. I assumed I would need little or no research in order to write a story set in Iceland. In the end, however, it was research that proved invaluable in helping me do what I most wanted to; get into my protagonist's head.

Conclusion

For most of my life, I have wanted to write. But, as I said in the introduction to this essay, that did not translate directly to me sitting down and actually writing anything. Once you have taken the leap and put pen to paper, however, it is far more difficult to stop writing than it ever was to start. In all honesty, I doubt I could stop even if I wanted to. My mind has been set ablaze and I find myself swamped with ideas for stories; worlds, characters and events springing to life and begging to be written down and made real.

As director Kevin Smith said in his book *Tough Shit: Life Advice From A Fat, Lazy Slob Who Did Good*: “In the face of such hopelessness as our eventual, unavoidable death, there is little sense in not at least trying to accomplish all of your wildest dreams in life.” (200). *I See Fire* means many things to me, but most of all, it is a beginning. It is the start of me following my dreams, and it is as exhilarating as it is frightening. It was fun, at times, and so difficult I wanted to quit, at others. But it was never anything other than wholly rewarding. It was never anything other than the right thing for me to do. What this assignment taught me is that if you are passionate about something, anything at all, it is your responsibility to pursue it. Even if you fail, even if you crash and burn in a spectacular fashion, it is your responsibility. That is the price we pay to whoever, or whatever, put us on this earth. And, thanks to the support and guidance I have received from the English department at the University of Iceland, and those around me, that is what you will find me doing.

Whether you are reading this assignment in order to grade it, or as research, or even if you stumbled upon it by chance, I only hope that you enjoyed the journey half as much as I did.

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