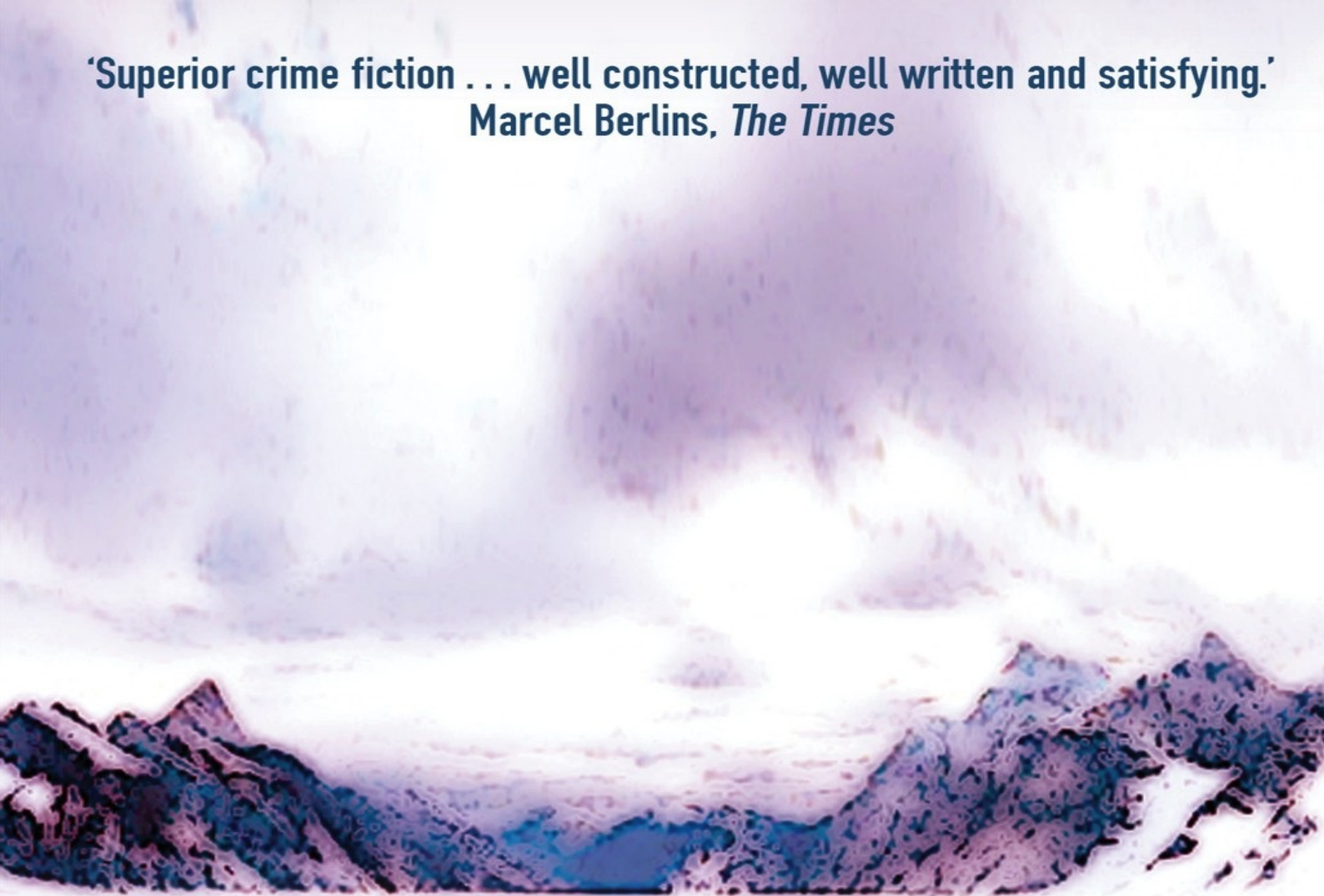


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Featuring OFFICER GUNNHILDUR

WINTERLUDE

AN ICELANDIC MURDER MYSTERY

Quentin Bates

Quentin Bates escaped suburbia as a teenager and spent a decade in Iceland, before returning to his English roots with an Icelandic family and turning to writing for a living.

Winterlude is a short story featuring Sergeant Gunnhildur (the three novels so far, *Frozen Out*, *Comfort and Chilled to the Bone*, are also published by Constable & Robinson), who emerged from an intimate knowledge of Iceland, as well as a deep affection for and fascination with the country and its people.

Also by Quentin Bates

Frozen Out
Cold Comfort
Chilled to the Bone

Winterlude

Quentin Bates



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Monday

The red of Helgi's usually healthy complexion had gone, replaced by pallid cheeks.

'It's not pretty, Chief,' he said, sucking cold air into his lungs in deep breaths as occasional snowflakes spun through the air. 'Sometimes I wonder if I'll ever get used to this part of the job.'

Gunna steeled herself and stepped past the equally stiff-faced uniformed officer standing guard and stepped through the doorway. One white-suited and masked figure inside was systematically photographing everything, the flash bouncing off walls that had once been white but had turned a shade of nicotine ivory over the years, while the other stooped low over a third figure on the floor. Gunna made out the arms spread wide of a man flat on his ample back. The hands looked huge, pale under the harsh artificial light, flat to the floor as if holding on, with scattered black hairs growing from the knuckles.

'Anything you can tell me, Sigmar?'

The kneeling figure looked around and shook his head. As he moved, Gunna saw the rest of the body on the floor, a worn leather jacket over a thick chest and a pot-belly. She caught her breath at the sight of the man's head. There was no face to speak of, its features flattened and broken.

'Stone dead and it's a damned mess,' Sigmar said, his voice muffled by the mask across his mouth. 'That's all I can tell you right now, Gunna. Sorry.'

'There must have been a weapon involved, surely?'

He nodded his head slowly. 'I'd say so. You don't get that kind of result with bare hands.'

'Any identification?'

Sigmar unzipped the man's coat and felt inside, shook his head and leaned back. 'Nothing there.'

'Back pocket?'

He felt along the corpse's side, then leaned over the body to feel the other, before lifting himself upright holding a worn wallet that he placed into Gunna's hand. 'Be my guest,' he said with more formality.

'Thanks. I'll leave you to it. But the sooner you can tell us anything more, the better,' Gunna told him. 'I can see headlines already.'

Helgi shivered as Gunna flipped through the man's wallet with latex-covered fingers.

'How long has this place been empty?'

'A good few years. It went bankrupt right after the crash and it's been empty since.'

They stood in the entrance of what had once been a boat-builder's workshop. Voices echoed under the high ceiling and a layer of grey plastic dust coated every surface in the place.

'Six thousand, five hundred krónur. A video rental card, a debit card that's ten years out of date,' she muttered as Helgi leaned over her shoulder. 'No driving licence. No health insurance card.'

'What's the name on the debit card? I can't see it without my glasses.'

'Borgar Jónsson. Does that mean anything to you?'

Helgi's forehead puckered with lines as he thought. 'It does ring a bell somewhere and I'm sure I've heard the name recently as well. I just can't think where,' he admitted.

Gunna dropped the wallet into an evidence bag and sealed it before peeling off her gloves.

'Get yourself back to the shop and see what you can dig up,' she decided. 'Sigmar will let us know when it's all over here and I'll knock on a few doors around this area. Who found him, then?'

‘A guy who works down the street. He said he’d driven past and seen the door wide open, so I went to close it and decided to have a quick look inside first. Now he wishes he hadn’t, I guess.’

‘Fair enough,’ Gunna said. ‘We can talk to him later.’

‘When he’s managed to get over the shock. I gather the ambulance took him away.’

‘It’s not the kind of sight that’s going to improve your day, is it?’

The screech of steel being cut greeted Gunna as she stepped inside. It lasted only a few seconds and brought to mind some great animal being painfully slaughtered. A shower of flying sparks subsided and the big man lifted his safety glasses and glowered.

‘We’re busy,’ he said, hands on his glasses again. ‘You need to go next door.’

‘Police,’ Gunna said, opening her wallet and displaying her ID.

‘You’re here about . . . ?’ the man asked with a shrug of one shoulder and a jerk of the head.

‘Right first time.’

He pulled the glasses off, folded them and put them in the pocket of his overall. ‘Then I’ll allow myself a well-deserved unofficial smoking break,’ he decided, heading for the door Gunna had just come in through. Outside the workshop he cupped a hand around a cigarette and lit it with a Zippo, drawing the smoke deep.

‘You are?’

‘Jón Geir Árnason. I sort of run this place, in that my wife runs it from the office upstairs and I do the actual hard work.’

‘The place over there, NesPlast. Know anything about it?’ Gunna asked.

‘It’s been empty for a while, since before we moved in here three years ago. Any idea who owns it? Business isn’t doing badly and we could do with moving to a bigger place.’

‘One of your staff discovered Borgar Jónsson’s body inside. Do you know what he was doing there?’

‘Halldór, that’s right,’ Jón Geir said. ‘He’s a bit of an old woman, even though he tries to come across as a tough guy. He told me the door over there was open and I said if he was worried he should go and have a quick look. I thought of going over there myself to check the place out. Like I said, we’re on the lookout for somewhere bigger and that would be perfect. But anyway, Halldór went over there and came back shaking like a leaf five minutes later. I called the police, and I guess you know the rest,’ he said, crushing out his cigarette under one boot.

‘Have you noticed any activity there? Anyone coming or going?’

Jón Geir shook his head and sniffed. ‘No. There’s a guy who comes once a month or so, but we’re used to seeing him now and again. Come to think of it, I don’t think I’ve seen him for quite a while and I was hoping to run into him sooner or later and find out if the place might be up for grabs. If anyone’s seen anything, it’d be Lára upstairs or Halldór. She can see the place from her window and Halldór comes and goes a lot more than I do. He does deliveries, so he’s in and out, while I’m stuck with the tools the whole time.’

‘And Halldór’s off sick?’

‘Yeah. The big pansy. He’ll be back tomorrow, he said.’

‘Where does he live?’

‘Hafnarfjörður. Lára can give you his address,’ Jón Geir said firmly, fiddling with the safety glasses he had taken out of his pocket and clearly anxious to get back to work. ‘Go out of this door and into the next one. The office is upstairs.’

The office upstairs was almost bare and Gunna wished she could keep her own workspace as tidy.

‘Lára?’ Gunna asked of the severe-looking woman who sat straight-backed at the computer. ‘Jón Geir downstairs said you might be able to answer a few questions.’

‘You’re from the police? About . . .?’ she asked, nodding towards the window.

‘I am.’

‘You have an address for Halldór? I understand he discovered your neighbour this morning.’

Lára wrote on a scrap of paper and handed it across.

‘Phone number?’ Gunna prompted, handing it back. Lára took it and scribbled a number that she didn’t need to look up.

‘He said he’d be back at work tomorrow, so you can find him here if you need to.’

‘I’m wondering why he left so quickly?’

‘I really couldn’t say. But he’s not the tough character he likes people to think he is, that’s for sure. In fact, Halldór’s a bit of an idiot.’

‘So why do you keep him on?’

Lára took off her glasses and fiddled with them. ‘Let’s say he’s not useless by any means. He works well and pays attention to detail. He’s just an odd character.’

Gunna walked across to the window and looked out over the road outside and NesPlast beyond where blue lights flickered against the NesPlast sign that had once been white.

‘You have a view over here. In fact, you’re probably the only person who does have a view of NesPlast, considering it’s the last place in the street. Have you noticed any movement over there? Any lights, anyone who comes and goes?’

‘I don’t spend my days looking out of the window, you know.’

Gunna laughed inwardly at the woman’s spiky retort. ‘Sure, I understand that. But every now and then you must stand up and go for a coffee or a pee or whatever, surely, and that takes you past the window?’

‘There’s only the guy who turns up every few weeks. He never stops there long. I know Jón Geir wants to speak to him when he gets a chance but we haven’t seen him for a while. I don’t know who he is, but he has a key to get in.’

‘Young? Old? What car does he drive?’

Lára’s impatience was clear. ‘I don’t know. Middle-aged, I guess. Thirties, maybe. There must have been a car but I didn’t notice one. That’s the kind of thing the boys would notice right away.’

‘This must be a quiet place, though – isn’t it?’

‘Too damned quiet. That’s one of our problems. This place is practically in the country,’ she said dismissively. ‘We’re at the end of the street at the far end of an industrial estate. There’s nothing there but lava fields and the main road behind that. We only live over there,’ she said, pointing out of the window at some distant roofs. ‘But I practically have to drive into Hafnarfjörður to get here.’

Gunna leaned on the window frame and thought how pleasant it must be to work so far from traffic noise and pollution.

‘So not many people pass here, then?’

‘Hell, no. You see a few people wandering around, but not many.’

‘Such as?’

‘Kids on bikes and scooters sometimes. Occasionally there’s a drunk who comes by.’

‘A drunk? This far out of town?’ Gunna asked, immediately suspicious. ‘That’s unusual. Just the one?’

‘I’ve only seen him a few times. Like I said, I don’t spend my time staring out of the window.’

‘What does he look like?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t pay attention to passing tramps,’ she snapped.

‘Young? Old?’ Gunna continued, ignoring Lára’s impatience. ‘Short? Tall?’

‘A big guy,’ she conceded.

‘As big as Jón Geir?’

‘Maybe, but tubbier.’

‘Age?’

‘Honestly, I couldn’t say. I’ve seen him go past a handful of times in the last few months, that all.’

‘Hair? Beard? How was he dressed?’

‘I don’t know,’ she floundered. ‘He didn’t have a beard, but he had longish hair,’ she decided putting the edge of her hand against her own neck as an indicator. ‘Dark clothes, as far as I remember.’

‘A shabby leather jacket, maybe?’

‘Could be,’ Lára said thoughtfully. ‘That sounds right.’

Gunna smiled. ‘It’s amazing how much detail people can recall when you push them a little.’

Gunna cursed, sensing instinctively that Sævaldur was waiting for her. He put out a hand to stop the door closing and she had no choice but to change course and join him in the lift instead of taking the stairs.

‘What’s happened up there?’ he asked as the lift started its stately upward progress.

‘Straightforward enough at first glance,’ Gunna said, studying the lift’s steel wall. ‘A guy’s had his head beaten in. Not a pretty sight.’

‘Nasty?’

‘The place looks like a modern art installation.’

‘What?’

‘You know. There’s blood everywhere. Redecoration in red.’

Sævaldur curled a lip. ‘Messy, then? Who’s the victim?’

‘Name of Borgar Jónsson, or so it seems.’

‘Ah.’

‘Ah, what? You know something I don’t?’

Sævaldur radiated satisfaction. ‘I may do. What do you want to know?’

The lift creaked to a standstill and the doors opened, but Sævaldur stood still, making no move to leave. Gunna pressed the ‘close doors’ button.

‘Sævaldur, I’ve no real desire to be stuck in a lift between floors with you. But I have a dead man, a nutcase on the loose somewhere, the chief superintendent wanting to be briefed as soon as possible so he can hold a press conference and I’m a man down with Eiríkur on leave. So if you have anything to tell me, I’d really prefer it if you’d spit it out and not play games.’

‘Hell, Gunna,’ Sævaldur said, backing as far away from her as the lift’s steel wall would allow. ‘There’s no need to throw all your toys out of the pram – not this early, anyway. Open the doors, will you?’

Gunna punched the button and the doors hissed open again. ‘Speak up. I’m listening.’

‘Borgar Jónsson was a weird character, and it was me and old Thorfinnur Markússon who arrested him, steaming drunk.’

‘What for?’

Sævaldur's usually deadpan expression softened. 'It was really unpleasant. He'd been on a afternoon drinking spree, tried to drive himself home in his monster GMC truck and went through a red light on Sudurlandsbraut. He managed to knock a lad off his bike in the process and drove right over him. Open and shut, all caught on CCTV. I don't suppose he even knew what he'd done and he didn't stop. Thorfinnur and I arrested him about an hour after the accident and he couldn't understand why we were there. It wasn't until he'd sobered up and seen the CCTV footage that he realized.'

'And he got eight years?'

'That's it. I didn't know he was out.'

'He's been at that hostel near the Grand Hotel for the last month.'

Sævaldur nodded slowly. 'The bastard,' he said with uncharacteristic feeling. 'If I had my way . . .'

'I know. You'd throw away the key, but only after you'd taken off his balls with an angle grinder.'

'That hostel's only a few hundred metres from where the boy was hit. So I hope it might have jogged his memory.'

'We can live in hope. So, plenty of people who might have a grievance?'

'Shit, dozens, I'd say. Borgar Jónsson had pissed off a lot of people in business as well. You know the type, he'd been bankrupt more times than you've . . . Well,' Sævaldur coughed. 'Let's not go there. But you know what I mean.'

'I can imagine. Anyway, thanks for the potted digest,' Gunna said, stepping aside to let Sævaldur escape from the lift.

'News, Gunnhildur?' Ívar Laxdal asked, appearing suddenly next to her within minutes of taking a seat at her desk.

'Dead man, multiple blows to the head. Looks like his name is Borgar Jónsson, or that's the name on the out-of-date bank card he had in his pocket, and it seems there's some history there if this does turn out to be the same guy. Helgi's chasing the bank to try and find out the man's identity number.'

'It's not on the card?'

'It's a card that was issued a dozen years ago by a savings bank that doesn't exist any more.'

'Ah. Keep me informed, would you?' he instructed and left as silently as he had appeared.

'Any joy with the bank, Helgi?'

Helgi lifted his glasses so that they were jammed firm against his forehead. 'The savings bank was taken over by another one after the crash,' he said dolefully. 'I'm assured they have the details, but it might take an hour to find them. They'll call back,' he added in a tone that indicated his lack of faith in that statement.

'Give them ten minutes and chase them again,' Gunna instructed, her attention on her computer. 'In any case, I have a feeling I may have found our man already,' she said slowly, scrolling through the list on her own screen.

'Already?' he echoed.

Gunna scribbled on a pad at her side, tore off the series of numbers and passed it over to Helgi.

'There's only one Borgar Jónsson in the national registry who could fit our candidate as far as age goes. Call the bank again, would you? Give them that number and date of birth, and just ask them to confirm if it's the same character.'

Helgi lowered his glasses to look at the note.

'Will do, Chief,' he said with a smile, and smacked his hand against his forehead. 'And now I remember where I've heard the name before.'

Gunna shivered in the still wind outside, which cut through her coat. Skies the colour of battleship loomed above the Reykjavík rooftops and that of the hostel she and Helgi quickly walked around to find the director coming towards them, his tie flapping over one shoulder.

‘Egill Bjarnason,’ he said in an anguished voice, thrusting his hand into Helgi’s and ignoring Gunna. ‘Could you come this way, please? There’s a TV camera already outside the front entrance, for some reason. We can get to my office through the rear door.’ He scurried ahead of them without waiting for a response, looking over his shoulder and twitching as he walked quickly through the bad cut grass that was leaving the legs of his smart suit soaked.

He seemed more at home in his office, as if back in his natural environment, ushering Gunna and Helgi to chairs in front of a practically bare desk while he manoeuvred himself behind it.

‘It’s terrible,’ he tutted. ‘Dreadful.’

‘I’m Gunnhildur Gísladóttir and this is my colleague, Helgi Svavarsson. We’re from CID,’ Gunn told him. ‘I see it didn’t take the press long to figure out a connection between Borgar Jónsson and this place. How the hell did that happen?’

‘I have no idea. He’s been missing for a day, so there was an announcement on the news this morning asking for sightings of him.’

‘That’s unusual so soon after a disappearance, isn’t it?’ Helgi asked.

‘Maybe,’ Egill admitted. ‘But we considered Borgar to be somewhat vulnerable.’

‘So tell us about him, will you?’ Gunna instructed.

‘He’s been here for eight weeks and hasn’t been a problem,’ he said, coughing. ‘I have no idea where he was doing where he was found. Our residents are free to come and go during the day as long as they’re back for the evening meal at six.’

‘For which he presumably didn’t show up?’

‘No.’

‘So you informed the police?’

‘The manager did that, or so I’m told. Standard procedure. These people are still effective convicts, even though they aren’t in prison.’

‘You said Borgar was vulnerable,’ Helgi said. ‘In what way?’

‘He wasn’t a well man. He was diabetic and walked with difficulty sometimes,’ replied Egill, clearing his throat. ‘It seems he hadn’t had an easy time in prison. Because of the nature of his crime he wasn’t popular, to say the least.’

‘And did that reflect on the fact that he served less than half of his sentence in Litla-Hraun?’

‘I would imagine that would have been taken into account.’

‘How long do your clients normally stay?’ Helgi asked. ‘Is that the right word – clients?’

Egill flapped his hands. ‘Clients. Residents. Whatever,’ he said, looking about him as if the panelled walls would tell him something. ‘These people are all former prisoners and they stay here for a week, two weeks, six months sometimes, while they acclimatize to normal life again. The ones who have served a long sentence tend to take longer to become de-institutionalized, so they stay here longer and find it harder to adjust, as do those who don’t have – how shall I put it? – a criminal care record behind them and are used to being in and out of prison.’

‘How much of his sentence was left?’

‘Four years.’

‘Hell,’ Helgi muttered to himself. ‘Sometimes I wonder why we bother catching them,’ he growled. ‘Any visitors? Were you aware of any threats to his safety? Had anyone been in contact with him, or do you know?’

‘I don’t know,’ Egill floundered. ‘I don’t have a great deal to do with the day-to-day running of the hostel, you see,’ he said with a thin smile. ‘My role is more an executive one.’

‘Which means what?’ Gunna asked. ‘I don’t mean to be rude, but we have a dead man to deal with and whoever committed the murder running around the city. So if you can’t provide a few answers maybe you could direct us to someone who can?’

‘Oh.’ Egill scowled, stung by Gunna’s words. ‘Your colleague is, er . . . forthright, I think is the word.’ He paused and coughed. ‘Maybe you should speak to Ásrún. She’s the manager here.’

Egill pushed his chair back and stood up. Gunna felt her phone vibrate in her pocket and looked at the screen quickly, dropping the phone back into her coat pocket.

‘Helgi, can you go with this gentleman and get whatever you can out of the manager if she’s likely to be the best-informed person in the building. I need to get back to the shop for half an hour and then back to the scene.’

‘No problem, Chief,’ Helgi said smartly as Egill looked from one to the other of them and it dawned on him that Gunna was the one in charge.

A TV camera had also been set up at the end of the unmade road on the industrial estate leading to the run-down workshop where Borgar Jónsson’s body had been found. Gunna recognized faces among the cluster around the camera but drove past without making eye contact, pulling up outside the building where an unmarked black van she knew belonged to one of the city’s undertakers was parked in front of the entrance with its back doors open.

‘Done?’ Gunna asked Sigmar as he peeled off his white suit, sitting on the tailgate of his 4×4.

‘I’m done here. We’ll have a look at our man later, but there’s no question what the cause of death is. Miss Cruz can give you details later, I expect.’

‘Know any more about this place?’

‘It was a fibreglass workshop. I understand they mostly built boats, until it closed down.’

‘Has the place been swept for prints?’

‘It has, and I have half a dozen items to take away with me. You’re free to poke around to your heart’s content. We’ve managed to get the lights to work, so there’ll be no fumbling around in the dark.’

‘Why? Was the power off?’

‘The circuit breaker for the lights had been tripped. But it could have been like that for years for all I know.’

Gunna snapped on a pair of latex gloves and shivered as she walked around the echoing workshop. It was late in the afternoon and the transparent sections in the high roof that let in light during the day were becoming dark squares. The dust that covered every surface of the place had been disturbed across the floor and she padded cautiously around the area where Borgar Jónsson had been killed. The shadows at the edges of the workshop were trestles and sheets of timber and plastic, all covered with the same grey dust, all quite obviously untouched for years, Gunna decided as she moved one of the trestles and a miasma of fine dust filled the air.

The iron steps of the spiral staircase creaked and echoed as she placed her feet on them. Each step was a steel grille, so no prints were visible, but at the top of the stairs she clicked on the light to see the open area that had once been the coffee room swept clean and the tables wiped down. Even the calendar on the wall had been folded to the correct month. The sink in the corner was clean and muddy had been washed and placed on the draining board. Even the coffee machine had an inch of black liquid in its glass jug. Gunna flicked the filter drawer open and sniffed. The coffee grounds were still

damp.

A clang on the iron staircase shook her from her thoughts and she felt in her pocket to make sure the can of pepper spray was there as feet banging on the steps echoed through the building and a tousled blond head appeared at floor level, staring at her.

‘Who the fuck are you?’

Gunna bridled. ‘I could ask you the same question,’ she snapped. ‘But since you asked first, I can tell you that I’m a police officer and now I’d like to know who the hell you are and why you saw fit to barge past the tape downstairs that clearly says “Keep Out” in nice big easy-to-read letters?’

The rest of the figure appeared as the man came up the remaining steps with a crestfallen expression on his face.

‘I’m Óli Baldurs. What’s going on here?’ he asked. ‘Are you a real cop?’

Gunna flipped open her ID wallet in front of him. ‘Gunnhildur Gísladóttir, CID serious crime unit. Who are you and what brings you here?’

‘Like I said, I’m Óli and I sort of look after this place for my uncle while he’s . . .’ he began, and his voice faltered.

‘While he’s inside?’

‘Yeah. Exactly. I had a call from a mate who said there was something going on here so I came to have a look.’

‘How are you related to Borgar Jónsson?’

‘He’s my dad’s brother. But he and Dad don’t talk any more, so I check on this place for Borgar sometimes. It’s about the only thing the poor old guy has left.’

Óli made to cross the floor towards the canteen area.

‘Stay there, please,’ Gunna instructed. ‘This is a crime scene and I can do without your fingerprints all over the place.’

‘Crime scene?’

‘You’re not aware that your uncle was released from prison eight weeks ago?’

‘What? No.’

‘He’s been out for almost two months and he’s been at a transition hostel. But what’s maybe more relevant is that his body was found downstairs earlier today. You didn’t know?’

Óli’s face had gone chalk white and he put out a hand to steady himself against the handrail at the top of the stairs. ‘What? I had no idea . . . How? What happened?’

‘He was assaulted.’

Óli took some deep breaths and let out a long sigh. ‘Shit . . . I saw on the news at work that there had been a murder out this way, but I never imagined it could have been Borgar. We didn’t even know he was out of Litla-Hraun.’

‘Someone knew. Considering what a mess this place is in downstairs, I’m wondering why it’s so tidy up here?’

Óli looked around in surprise. ‘Yeah. Who did this?’

‘I take it you didn’t? When you say you look after this place, what does that mean?’

‘I drop in here once a month or so to make sure nobody’s broken in or that there aren’t any burst pipes. Apart from that, nobody comes near the place.’

‘This was your uncle’s workshop, was it?’

‘Yeah. It’s all that’s left of the businesses he had before his . . .’ He gulped. ‘His accident,’ he finished.

‘So your uncle built boats?’

‘Sort of. He owned the place and he had other businesses and properties as well. This place was run by a guy called Henning, and Borgar just left him to it, as far as I know. But when he went to prison, the place was all sold off and I guess Hafdís dealt with all that stuff. Then there was the crash and nobody wanted to buy any more. So this place has been pretty much forgotten. It’ll get auctioned off, I suppose, sooner or later. The council tax bills are piling up and they won’t wait forever for the money.’

‘Hafdís?’

‘Borgar’s wife. She divorced him once he was inside and moved away. Took the kids with her and did well.’

‘Full name? And where did she move to?’

‘Hafdís Hafthórsdóttir. As far as I know she moved to somewhere in Norway. Our side of the family doesn’t have a lot of contact with Hafdís, but I’m in touch with one of the children on Facebook.’

Gunna’s phone ringing in her pocket startled them both as it echoed against the bare walls.

‘Hæ, Helgi,’ Gunna greeted him. ‘What news?’

‘All sorts, Chief. All sorts. Just wondering when you’re likely to be back. I’ve made a list of people who didn’t have a very high opinion of our Borgar and I’m wondering where we make a start.’

‘Spoilt for choice, are we? I’ll be back in twenty minutes or so. In the meantime, can you organise a locksmith to get over to Borgar’s unit and change the lock, and a patrol to be here while the job is being done? It needs closing up securely before we go much further.’

‘Will do, Chief,’ Helgi said and rang off.

‘You heard that?’ Gunna asked Óli, who had listened to the brief conversation with a dazed look on his face.

‘Yeah. I’ll stay here until the locksmith has been if you like.’

‘Good. I need your contact details and I’ll certainly have to ask you a few more questions, probably tomorrow,’ Gunna said, writing quickly in her notepad.

‘Hafdís Hafthórsdóttir, you said?’

‘Hafdís Helga Hafthórsdóttir, her name is. The children are Sævar and Sara Björt.’

‘Address?’

‘I don’t have it on me. Norway somewhere.’

‘Your name?’

‘Óli Már Baldursson.’

Gunna wrote down names and a string of home, work and mobile numbers before closing her notepad and giving Óli a smile as her phone buzzed.

Locksmith in 15 minutes. Patrol on the way. H, she read.

‘We’ll stand outside, if you don’t mind,’ she decided and followed him down the clanging staircase. ‘By the way, Henning – the chap who used to run this place – where’s he now?’

‘No idea. He was an old boy, so he ought to be retired by now,’ Óli said, discomfort evident in his voice. ‘But I don’t suppose he is. He’s not the retiring type, I guess.’

‘Full name?’

‘Henning Simonsen. It’s a Faroese name, I think, although I don’t know if he’s from the Faroes or if his family came from there.’

‘Any idea where he lives?’

‘Sorry. I try and steer clear of my uncle’s affairs as far as possible. I can do without the headache if you know what I mean.’

A blast of wind met them as Gunna pulled open the heavy outside door just as a burly uniformed officer was about to push it open.

‘Hæ, Gunna. Job for us, is there?’ he asked, looking Óli up and down suspiciously.

‘Just a quick one, Geiri. There should be a locksmith here in a few minutes to change the lock of this place. I’d like you to be here while it’s done and drop the keys in at Hverfisgata when he’s finished. Oh, and get him to secure the other doors while he’s at it, would you? Just make sure they’re bolted from the inside.’

‘But what about me?’ Óli asked. ‘Don’t I get a key?’

‘When it’s no longer a crime scene you can have all the keys,’ Gunna told him. ‘But until then it stays locked up tight.’

Gunna shook the rain off her coat as she walked in at the main police station on Hverfisgata and found Sævaldur Bogason on the way out. They had regularly clashed as uniformed officers more than a decade ago, before Gunna left Reykjavík for a country beat in her coastal village of Hvalvík, where she still lived, resolutely refusing to move to the city and commuting for almost an hour each way every morning and evening instead. Returning to Reykjavík after almost ten years to join CID, Gunna found that Sævaldur was still there and had been promoted, most recently to chief inspector. Wary of each other and each other’s methods, they generally kept out of the other’s way.

‘How goes it with Borgar?’ Sævaldur asked, and Gunna wondered if he was being friendly, helpful or simply inquisitive.

‘Early days yet. Plenty of people to quiz.’

Sævaldur spun a set of car keys on his little finger, twirling them and catching them in his palm. ‘There’s a guy called Kjartan you ought to talk to,’ he said finally. ‘The father of the boy Borgar drove over and killed.’

‘That’s understandable. You reckon he could have done it?’

Sævaldur shrugged. ‘No idea. But I was there on the last day of Borgar Jónsson’s trial and Kjartan was in the gallery as well. Kjartan went wild when the verdict was given. Snapped, I suppose. He yelled across the court that he’d be waiting at the prison gate for Borgar when he came out.’

Gunna’s eyebrows lifted and she nodded. ‘Like I said, that’s understandable. Eight years for killing the boy and then he’s out in four. Have you heard anything of this Kjartan since?’

‘Not a word. He was a sailor back then and he was at sea when his son was killed, somewhere off West Africa, and it was three days before he could get home.’

‘Must have been three nightmare days,’ Gunna declared.

‘I’d imagine he’s probably still at sea, and if it’s an Icelandic ship he’s on, he’ll be registered on board.’

‘Which means a chat with Customs. Thanks, Sæsi.’

‘I don’t know what’s the matter with Sævaldur,’ Gunna grumbled when she reached her desk.

‘What’s the awkward old fool done now?’

‘Nothing. That’s what’s so confusing. He’s actually been helpful.’

Helgi lifted his glasses from his face and let them drop to the table in front of him as he rubbed his eyes. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘I suppose there has to be a first time for everything. Midlife crisis, maybe?’

‘Hell, I don’t know. I’ve never understood much about how men think.’

‘Speaking of which, how is your Gísli?’

Gunna sat down and nudged her computer into life. ‘You know, Helgi, I don’t see a lot of the lad.’

the moment. Hardly surprising considering he's at sea for weeks at a stretch.'

'He still lives with you, does he?'

'You have all this to come. He lives with me in the sense that there's a stack of post for him, I keep tripping over his boots in the hall and there's a room in my house that's full of his stuff. But that's as far as it goes. He's either at sea or he's in Reykjavík with Soffía. He stops off, gives his old mum a kiss on the cheek if she happens to be home, grazes through the contents of the fridge, picks up his coat and he's gone.'

'I'm looking forward to it already, although it's more likely their mother will be the one who has to deal with all that stuff.'

'And then you'll get it again in, what? Fifteen years' time?'

'Don't remind me. I'll be a pensioner by then.'

'I don't know how you do it, Helgi. Supporting one family's hard enough, let alone two.'

'Tell me about it. Overtime helps, I assure you.'

'Speaking of which, what progress on Borgar Jónsson?'

Helgi replaced his glasses, flipped through his notes and took a breath. 'Ready?'

'Fire away, my good man.'

'The boy's name was Aron Kjartansson. Borgar ran him over, didn't stop and was arrested an hour later by officers Sævaldur Bogason and Thorfinnur Markússon. The boy was an only child. The boy's father, Kjartan Aronsson, and his mother, Katla Einarsdóttir, split up a few months later. Kjartan made some very public threats towards Borgar at the time, both in court and in newspaper interviews afterwards.'

'That's all in the police records?'

'Only the stuff about the arrest. I had a quick browse through the papers at the time, and there's plenty about it all in there.'

'All right. Continue,' Gunna instructed.

'Borgar owned a small import business that handled tyres and a few other odd bits and pieces like exercise bikes, cheap electronics, that sort of junk. Plus he had a garage and car wash that was on the verge of bankruptcy and the yard where the boats were built. Apparently that was the most successful business. Borgar knew practically nothing about boats; it was run by this Henning guy and Borgar hardly came near it.'

'So what do we have?' Gunna asked, leaning back. 'We have Kjartan and Katla, both with a strong motive to bump Borgar off. Plus we have Henning, who presumably lost his job through this. Are there others?'

'Any number of dissatisfied customers over the years, or so it seems. But I reckon if I can find out about Henning he'll give us an insight into them.'

'Borgar's family?'

'Wife left the country soon after he was put away. There's a rather strange daughter who does stuff with crystals and a son who doesn't want to have anything to do with his father, both living overseas now.'

Gunna nodded. 'Quick work, Helgi. Where did all that come from?'

'A lot from Ásrún, the manager at the hostel,' Helgi said, then hesitated. 'Gunna . . .'

'Yes?' she replied and looked up from her screen.

'It's Kjartan. Kjartan Aronsson. I've come across him before.'

'He has a record of some kind?'

Helgi looked briefly uncomfortable. 'He does, but nothing to do with this,' he said finally.

‘Kjartan’s the eldest of four brothers and they’re all as hard as nails. I was at school with his younger brother and we were close friends when we were teenagers.’

‘So he’s from Blönduós or somewhere round there?’

‘Almost. Their father farmed out at a place called Tunga. My dad had the farm at Hraunbær, which was a good way further inland. All of us country boys went to boarding school at Reykir for a couple of terms and that’s where I was at school with Kjartan’s brother, Ingi. I went out to Tunga quite a few times when I was a lad. My dad knew old man Aron as well and he used to buy a few litres of moonshine off him now and then.’

‘So what do you reckon?’ Gunna asked thoughtfully. ‘You have an idea of what Kjartan’s capable of. Do you think he could have murdered Borgar?’

‘Undoubtedly,’ Helgi said without hesitation.

‘Do you want to talk to Kjartan, considering you know his background?’

Helgi thought for a moment. ‘No,’ he said eventually. ‘It’s probably best if you do it. I’d be interested to know what you make of him, and I reckon someone he doesn’t know would get more out of him. But I’ll have a quiet chat with Ingi later if he’s in Reykjavík.’

Gunna decided that the industrial estate where Borgar Jónsson had been murdered was a relic of an earlier age when buildings were thrown up with less bother, and progress had left the street behind before there had even been an opportunity to tarmac it. Deep puddles filled the road and Gunna’s car pulled up outside the deserted and locked unit covered with brown water. She had been on the way home, but had found herself unable to pass the turnoff to the sprawl of industrial estates that had spread over the lava fields outside Hafnarfjörður, and found herself driving around curiously in the gathering darkness, which was slashed by the glaring lights from offices and workshops.

Thankful that she had worn a decent pair of boots, she splashed around the deeper puddles. Borgar Jónsson’s unit at the end was the only one that was clearly deserted. Although she could see that which Jón Geir on the opposite side of the road was still at work, the office window upstairs was black, presumably Lára had left.

She pushed open the door of the unit three doors along from NesPlast and was greeted by Tammy Wynette from a cracked speaker urging a woman to stand by her man, accompanied by a mournful baritone in poor harmony coming from an unidentified source.

‘Hello! Anyone there?’ Gunna called and a figure in overalls, its face hidden behind safety glasses appeared from behind the car that filled the workshop.

‘Hi. What can I do for you?’ the figure asked, sliding the glasses up with grease-covered hands.

‘Gunnhildur Gísladóttir, CID,’ she announced, flashing her wallet. ‘You have a spare minute?’

‘Is this about Borgar’s place down the road?’

‘It is. Were you about yesterday?’

The man turned his back and as Gunna made her way around the car, she saw he was scrubbing his hands at a sink in the corner. The hand he dried and extended to be shaken was still black.

‘What year?’ she asked, nodding at the rusty Ford Bronco.

‘Seventy-two, or so it says on the registration docs,’ he replied, his face lighting up. ‘You know something about these?’

‘My dad had one years ago. It practically broke his heart when he finally had to scrap it, but there wasn’t a panel left that wasn’t rusted through.’

‘Shame.’

‘You’re Stefán? One of my colleagues spoke to you this morning.’

‘That’s right. The baldie.’

~~‘I’m sure that’s not how he’d describe himself, but yes, that’s him. I know he asked you about yesterday, which is when we believe Borgar was probably murdered.’~~

‘That’s right. Didn’t see anything.’

‘You’re here on your own?’

‘Yeah. Most of the time, but I wasn’t here yesterday,’ he said. ‘There’s an old chap comes in two days a week, but I can’t afford to employ anyone at the moment. There’s work to be had tarting up old cars for rich collectors, but not as much as there used to be.’

‘I know you didn’t see anything yesterday, but I’m wondering about the week or two before. Have you noticed any activity in Borgar’s unit? Or anyone new poking around?’

Stefán gingerly inserted a little finger into one ear as he thought, scratching deep inside with a thoughtful look on his face.

‘There have been lights on at Borgar’s place during the last week or two. I reckoned it was his nephew Óli pottering around there. Thought he might be showing someone around, so I didn’t poke my nose in.’

‘Did you see Óli?’

Stefán removed the finger from his ear and looked more relaxed now that the blockage was cleared. ‘No. Now that you mention it, I don’t recall seeing that fancy Frelander of his, either. Mind you, it’s not as if I was keeping an eye on the place.’

‘Any unusual traffic? There can’t be many people coming up here without good reason, surely?’

‘Well, no. This place is a dead end. But I spend most of my time looking at the inside of a car, not staring out of the window in case someone comes down the street.’

‘Fair point. How long do you reckon since you started seeing lights at Borgar’s unit?’

Stefán frowned and thought. ‘It was while we had Jói Jóa’s Cadillac in here,’ he said slowly, and brightened as he went to the workbench and consulted a diary. He ran a finger down a page of entries written in a surprisingly neat hand. ‘It came in two weeks ago yesterday. So it would have been some time that week. That’s about as exact as I can be.’

‘Thanks,’ Gunna said. ‘That’s a big help. Any particular time of day you saw lights on?’

‘Afternoons, mostly, I reckon – as far as I remember. I didn’t pay that much attention.’

‘Thanks,’ Gunna repeated, handing him a card. ‘If anything else springs to mind, I’d appreciate a call.’

Stefán tucked the card in a pocket. ‘Yeah. Will do,’ he agreed. ‘But if you find the bastard who did it, I’d appreciate it if you nailed him to the wall. Borgar had his faults, but he was a decent enough character.’

‘You knew him well?’

‘Not really. He was always busy with whatever new business he was immersed in, but he always had time to stop for a coffee and a few of those dirty jokes he always seemed to pick up. Mind you, he had the sense to always be too busy when he wanted his car serviced.’

Gunna left the workshop and made her way along the street. An hour later she had learned little other than that the long-deserted workshop had seen a little activity recently. Nobody had seen anything unusual. Like Stefán, the carpenter next door to him, the refrigeration engineer and the soft drinks importer further along the same street had little time to watch for passers-by.

Night had fallen when Gunna unlocked her car and sat behind the wheel. She was writing notes waiting for the heater to clear the windscreen when there was a tap on the window. She looked up to see Stefán looking in.

‘Any ideas?’ she asked, winding down the window.

‘Not sure,’ he said, his forehead knitted with lines as he scowled. ‘There’s a blue Nissan van I’ve seen a few times in recent weeks and thought nothing of it. That’s all I can tell you.’

‘Any registration number?’

Stefán shook his head. ‘Nah. No such luck. A dark blue van, with a white panel on each side as if someone had peeled off a company name or a logo.’

‘Did you get a look at the driver?’

‘No. Sorry. Wasn’t paying a lot of attention. I couldn’t tell you if it went to Borgar’s unit or somewhere else. I just saw it go past a few times.’

‘Definitely more than once, though? So this wasn’t someone who was just lost?’

‘This street is a dead end. Nobody comes down here more than once without a good reason,’ Stefán said. ‘That’s one reason I like being here. But I reckon I saw the Nissan two, three times, for definite.’

‘Thanks. It all helps,’ Gunna replied, and Stefán smiled diffidently at her before turning around and walking back to his open door.

Tuesday

A biting wind swept in from the sea, whipping up whitecaps that spat spray while gulls hovered and swooped gracefully above the black rocks of the shore a hundred yards away across scrub grass. Gunna was sure it would be a delightful spot in summer, but the November cold did little for its charms, even with Esja and the row of distant mountains across Faxe Bay picked out in startling bright sunshine.

Kjartan Aronson looked impassively through the glass of his front door and ushered Gunna inside, his expression giving nothing away. The terraced house was a mess. Dust was everywhere and Gunna felt her nose protest.

‘There’s been some work going on here while I’ve been away. I thought they’d be finished by the time I got back, but they haven’t. Sorry,’ he said, not sounding at all apologetic, as he gestured at the sawhorse in the middle of the living room and the new parquet floor that only reached halfway across it. ‘My brother’s been working on it in between other jobs, but I guess he must be busy with paid work these last few weeks. So big brother gets the short end of the stick.’

‘That’s Ingi, is it?’

Kjartan’s eyes narrowed. ‘Could be. What does Ingi have to do with the police?’

‘You came home last night?’ Gunna asked, ignoring the question.

‘Docked at midday yesterday in Dalvík. I flew back from Akureyri.’ Kjartan waved Gunna to an armchair, the only one in the half-finished room, while he sat down on an upturned crate, flexing his shoulders as he did so. Gunna could not fail to notice the muscles that bulged beneath the man’s snuggly shirt and the biceps that left no doubt that Kjartan was not a stranger to hard work or the gym, or both. ‘Anyway, what do the police want with me? Not that I need to make too many guesses.’

‘You’re aware that Borgar Jónsson is dead, I take it?’

‘I am, and I gather he was helped on his way.’

‘How do you know that?’

Kjartan gave the first hint of a smile. ‘It was on the news last night that a man had been killed under suspicious circumstances. Someone told me that it might have been Borgar. I put two and two together when I saw the pictures of the hostel on the news and wasn’t surprised.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘You’re the detective. I’m sure you have a pretty good idea,’ Kjartan said, and his eyes crossed the room to the only picture on display anywhere, a black and white portrait of a boy of ten or eleven. Gunna guessed, grinning at the camera from the pillion of a motorbike while the driver was undoubtedly a younger and happier Kjartan than the impassive, bristle-headed man sitting on a box in front of her, the low winter sunlight slanting through the room’s picture window and glancing off the flat surfaces that he seemed to be made of.

‘You can confirm you weren’t in Reykjavík yesterday, I take it?’

‘I didn’t get back to Reykjavík until five. Four o’clock flight from Akureyri and a taxi home. That’s a perfect alibi, I reckon.’

‘How do you know? Are you aware of when Borgar’s killing took place?’

‘Well, no. Of course not. But it was on the news while we were still steaming home. It was only later I found out it was that bastard getting what he deserved.’

‘You have to understand that anyone who might have had any kind of a grudge against this man

could be a suspect.'

'Except me. I have a perfect alibi,' he repeated, a hint of satisfaction in his voice. 'I'll happily sing and dance and piss on his grave after what he did. I make no apologies for it.' He paused and Gunnar looked into hate-filled black eyes. 'But I didn't kill the man.'

Gunna nodded, taken aback by the virulent anger that spilled out of Kjartan's voice, accompanied by his heavy hands balling unconsciously into fists.

'You made threats against Borgar Jónsson several times, some of them very specific.'

'I did. And I stand by them. I'm just sorry that someone beat me to it.'

'You knew he was out of prison?'

'I did.'

'And?'

'And what? What do you expect me to say? Did you expect me to be waiting outside Litla-Hraun for him as the gate opened? Look, I've been away for a while. I'm at sea for two, three weeks at a stretch and this is the first time I've been off for more than a couple of days since we went back to school in September. You get it? I've hardly been here. In fact, I've deliberately not been here and I've been on working trips for other people who wanted time off.'

'Because of Borgar?'

'Exactly. Because of that piece of filth. I knew that if I were to even see the man I wouldn't be able to hold back. I was told he was about to be let out, so I decided to make myself scarce,' he said, the angles of his face sharpening as his loathing became apparent. 'If I'd seen the man, I'd have killed him. End of story. Except somehow I don't suppose I'd have been let out with a pat on the back halfway through my sentence to go and live in a luxury hostel.'

'I understand,' Gunna said as Kjartan's mouth opened to speak and he closed it again, his breath coming in sharp bursts.

'How the fuck can you understand?' Kjartan replied with scorn in his voice. 'How can you understand what it's like to have someone taken away like that? One moment they're there, the next they've been wiped out as if they'd never existed.'

'You'd be amazed, Kjartan,' Gunna said softly as a heavy silence followed his outburst. 'Sometimes it's best not to make assumptions about people you don't know. Who told you that Borgar was being released?'

Gunna wondered if Kjartan was wiping tears from his eyes as he kneaded his face with the heels of his hands. 'My wife told me,' he said eventually. 'My ex-wife, considering we went our separate ways after Aron died.'

At the café by the quayside, day was breaking and the chef was banging stainless steel pans into the slots ready for lunch. The place was quiet with the morning coffee break over, as Helgi sipped his drink gratefully and Gunna flicked through her notes.

'Kjartan Aronsson has an alibi that's pretty damn fireproof,' she said morosely.

'You're sure?'

'Absolutely. I phoned the fleet manager at the company he works for. He's been at sea more or less non-stop since September. His ship docked yesterday and he flew home late afternoon.'

'Hours after Borgar Jónsson's body was found,' Helgi said.

'And a day after he was murdered. Assuming Borgar was killed the day before his body was found. It could be longer – the hostel had only reported his disappearance on Sunday night. Had he been missing for longer than that? Did you ask Ásrún?'

'I did. She said he was there for breakfast on Sunday morning and left around nine. He's been working at a supermarket in Kópavogur these last few weeks, and having that job to go to was what got him out of the nick.'

'Taking work away from someone else,' Gunna growled.

'Depends how you look at it,' Helgi mused. 'Borgar wasn't a hazard to anyone else. It's not as if he was going to embark on a crime spree. So he's out of jail and keeping his nose clean instead of occupying a cell needed for someone who could well be dangerous.'

'That's a very tolerant viewpoint for a man who's always been a dyed-in-the-wool Progressive,' Gunna said with a smile. 'Not turning into a bleeding-heart leftie, are you?'

'It's the kind of opinion you'd expect from a lifelong communist such as yourself,' Helgi said gently.

'Communist? What? There have been a few lefties on the side of the family that comes from Ósvík but it's not compulsory,' Gunna retorted. 'Anyhow, Borgar was alive on Sunday morning, and I'm guessing that the supermarket he was supposed to be working in is your next stop, isn't it? If you narrow down when he was last seen alive, I'll see if there's anything else I can screw out of the neighbours. I want to ask a few questions in the next street and find out if anyone else was aware of any movements. I'm certain Borgar was spending his time there at that unit, considering how it has been swept and dusted upstairs. But the fingerprint results should tell us.'

'People keep themselves to themselves over there, I reckon. This isn't like a town where there are people around all the time. Industrial estates like this are a hive of activity from seven in the morning until three or four in the afternoon. After that they're deserted, and on Sundays. So good luck. Borgar was about on a Sunday afternoon, I'll bet you nobody noticed a thing.'

Helgi looked puzzled, frowned and sat back, staring out of the window past Gunna's shoulder as he absently scratched one ear with a rapid, unconscious movement.

'What's bugging you, Helgi?'

'What?'

'You've been as nervous as a cat all morning and it's not like you to snap back. What's bugging you?'

Helgi sucked his teeth briefly and tipped the remainder of his coffee down his throat. 'Refill?'

Gunna shook her head and Helgi stood up to make his way to the counter, returning with a full mug.

'It's those brothers. Kjartan and the rest of them.'

'What about them? You know one of the younger brothers?'

'I know them all, but Ingi was the one I knew best. Kjartan's the eldest and he was long gone from the district when I got to know Ingi and the others. They all wanted to be seamen, and they all gave it a try. But Kjartan's the only one who stayed with fishing. Össur's the farmer. Ingi's a carpenter in Blönduós and Reynir's an invalid.'

'How come?'

'Who knows? But he's certainly unhinged. Officially he hasn't worked for years. But I know and everyone else knows that he can drive a tractor as well as anyone, and being on the sick list doesn't stop him doing a full day's work when Össur or Ingi need him to help out. Those boys have always stuck together, and I'm just suspicious about this.'

'You reckon Borgar's death might have something to do with one of the brothers?'

Helgi nodded. 'Years ago Kjartan had a house that he couldn't sell. Quite by chance it burned down while he was on holiday in Crete.'

'Another perfect alibi?'

‘Absolutely. And it was lucky for him that as he was preparing to move anyway, he’d stored all his furniture in Össur’s barn. This was back when I was on the beat up there and it was the talk of the countryside how Kjartan had fiddled the insurance.’

‘Gossip or truth?’

Helgi thought for a moment. ‘A bit of both, I’d say, plus a healthy dollop of conjecture. But those brothers have always looked out for each other. If ever any of them has a problem, it magically gets sorted out while he’s unaccountably somewhere else. Kjartan’s unsellable house burns down while he’s on holiday. Össur’s daughter got herself tied up with some low-life who smacked her around, who amazingly enough found himself in casualty with a bunch of broken bones just when Össur happened to be at a winter celebration in Skagafjörður. You get the idea.’

‘So you think that Borgar was murdered by one of the brothers?’

Helgi shrugged. ‘I don’t know. Kjartan made very specific threats. He was at sea when Borgar was murdered. It adds up. On the other hand, there are plenty more people who had reason to hold a grudge against Borgar.’

‘You reckon the brothers would go as far as murder? You said Kjartan could kill, didn’t you?’

‘Kjartan, yes,’ Helgi said without hesitation. ‘Kjartan could kill if he needed to or wanted to. But he couldn’t have done it. Össur, I don’t know. I don’t think so. He comes across as a headcase but he doesn’t have that inbuilt mean streak that Kjartan has. Reynir’s anyone’s guess. He’s always been a nutcase, getting into fights he could never win. I’m amazed he hasn’t been sorted out good and proper before now. Although Ingi’s the one I know best, I’m not sure about him. He’s the most normal of the four of them, and he has a family now so he doesn’t live at the farm any more like Össur and Reynir. I’d say that barring Kjartan, Reynir’s the most likely candidate.’

‘Then you’d best go and find out, hadn’t you? Take one of the Daihatsus from the car pool and drive up there.’

‘Tomorrow?’ Helgi asked in surprise.

‘No. Go this afternoon if you can get away. If there’s a problem getting a car, then let me know and I’ll make sure it happens, even if we have to hire you a 4x4 for a few days.’

‘And you?’

‘I’ll look after things here and I’ll see if I can get an extra body to help us out while you’re up north,’ Gunna told him. ‘But now I have to go and see Kjartan’s former wife. That’s going to be fun.’

Gunna left a slightly bemused Helgi at the station on Hverfisgata to organize a car and she could only laugh to herself at his surprise at being sent north to the home town he had long left behind. He had called his wife on the way back into town and the news of his being away for a few days had been greeted with little enthusiasm. Gunna could imagine Halla’s tight-lipped look of disapproval and Helgi made sure to blame Gunna, while Gunna sat and nodded her agreement in the driving seat.

She headed out of town through the sparse afternoon traffic with the sun already low behind her against a gunmetal sky and watched the road as it unfolded ahead of her across the Hellisheidi heath, where bursts of steam erupted at intervals at the sides of the road before it dropped back down to ground level and the lowland towns on the far side.

She left Hveragerdi behind and looked around for signs as she drove into Selfoss, before locating the right road that snaked out of the little town and into the flat lands beyond. The church was the landmark. Gunna eyed its gaunt tower as she approached and took the turnoff before it to a quartet of low-slung wooden houses in a ring, like wagons in a circle, each with a car or two in the drive.

The front door opened before Gunna had left the car and dark eyes followed her as she crunched up

the drive, the gravel beneath her feet frozen together and only unwillingly giving way.

‘Katla?’ Gunna asked, knowing the answer and getting a nod in reply.

She looked older than Gunna had expected. The fresh but grief-stricken face she had seen in the news reports following the accident that had killed Aron Kjartansson and put Borgar Jónsson in prison had grown lines in the meantime.

‘Gunnhildur Gísladóttir,’ she said, extending a hand to be shaken. ‘I called this morning.’

‘About that man’s death?’ asked Katla, clearly not willing to even speak the name. ‘Come in.’

The living room of the wooden house was a mess of what Gunna thought of as toys for teenagers with the controllers of a PlayStation snaking from the television across a coffee table piled with debris to a sofa. In contrast, there was not a thing out of place in the spotless kitchen.

‘The boys use the front room most of the time,’ she explained, half apologetically. ‘I use the kitchen. They keep out of here and I leave their crap where it is.’

‘Boys?’

‘My sons,’ Katla said. ‘Elmar and Einar.’

‘I didn’t realize . . .’

‘That I had other children? But after Aron . . .’ She shook her head.

‘You came to live out here?’

‘It all fell apart after . . .’ she said, hesitating, and took a deep breath. ‘Kjartan retreated in himself. I was brought up around here, so I came back.’

‘I’m investigating Borgar Jónsson’s murder.’

Katla laughed briefly and humourlessly. ‘Great. When you find the killer, please let me know. I’ll buy him a drink before you lock him up.’

‘Where were you on Sunday?’

‘Me? I was here in the morning. I had coffee with a friend in Selfoss in the afternoon and called at work for a couple of hours after that.’

‘Where’s work?’

‘I work for a builder’s merchant in Selfoss. We were stocktaking on Sunday,’ Katla said with disbelief in her voice. ‘What is this? You think I killed that bastard? You are joking?’

‘Right now I don’t think anything. But if you were at work and that can be confirmed, then I can rule you out and that means I can cross you off a list that’s getting steadily longer.’

Mollified, Katla leaned against the kitchen cupboard and rooted through a drawer for a packet of cigarettes. ‘Fair enough. That sounds reasonable.’ She lit up, sent out a long plume of smoke and nodded sagely, then scribbled a number on a piece of paper that she tore from a calendar on the wall. ‘Grétar is the manager. I was there from three until about six. Before that I was at Bakkakaffi in Selfoss.’

She looked up as the door banged, bringing with it a blast of air that swept around their ankles. A lanky young man slouched into the doorway, looked Gunna up and down and departed wordlessly. Gunna raised an eyebrow.

‘That’s Elmar,’ Katla said.

‘How old is he?’

‘Twenty?’

‘And Einar?’

‘Two years older. Why?’

‘I’ll need to know where they were on Sunday as well.’

Tight-lipped, Katla went to the doorway and put her head into the living room. ‘Elmar, come in.’

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