THE WANDERER

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MICHAEL RIDPATH

THE WANDERER



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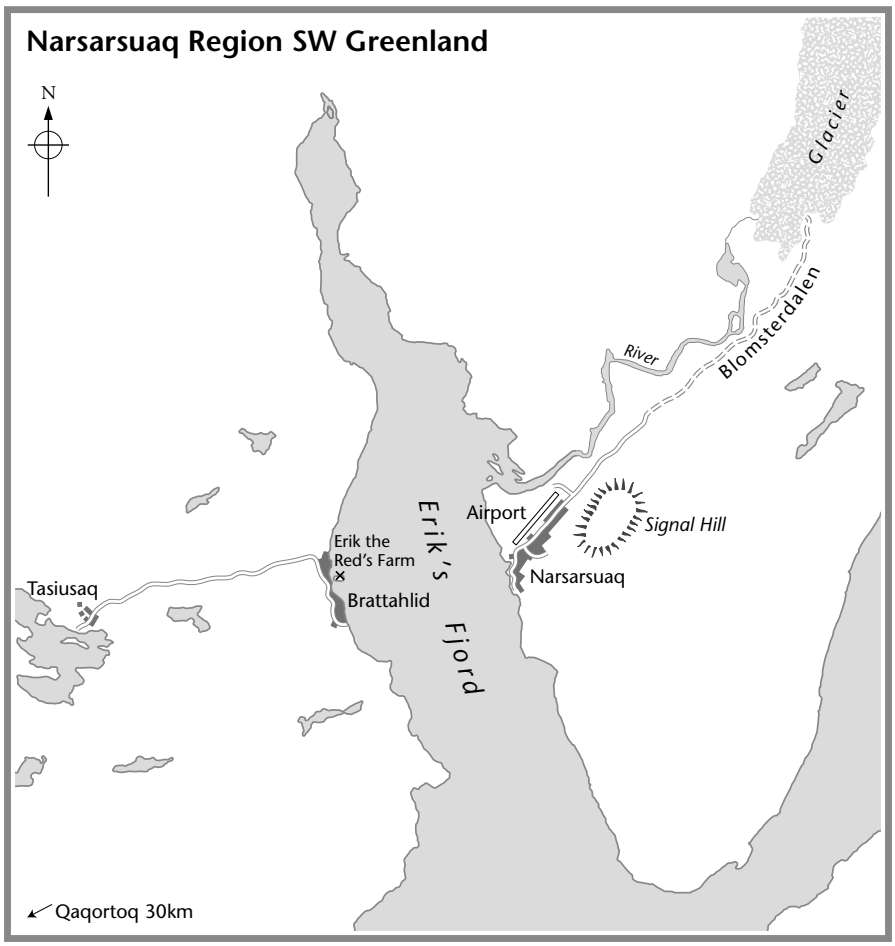
for Barbara

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The Icelanders are the most intelligent race on earth, because they discovered America and never told anyone.

Oscar Wilde

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Narsarsuaq Region SW Greenland
N
Glacier
River
Blomsterdalen
Airport
Signal Hill
Narsarsuaq
Erik the
Red's Farm
Brattahlid
Erik's Fjord
Tasiusaq
Qaqortoq 30km

PROLOGUE

Italy, 1979

'SO, JOHN. DO you still think the Vinland Map is for real?' Emilio's dark blue eyes glinted with amusement as he laid the trap for Nancy's husband to lumber into. They were only on their third bottle of wine, dinner was still bubbling in the kitchen, and the sun had not yet set behind the village perched on its hill just above the house. It was still a little early in the evening for Emilio to bait John.

The three of them had polished off two bottles at lunch, and Nancy had felt an incipient hangover when they had sat down on Emilio's terrace, but his fine red wine, the produce of the tiny vineyard lazing beneath them, had soon sorted that out. John and she never drank that much back home. She was rather enjoying it.

'I'm darned sure it's real, Emilio,' said John. 'You Italians have got to face the facts: the Norsemen discovered America, not Columbus. All the evidence points that way. The Viking settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland. The sagas. You know all that; you've just got to accept it.'

'Vinland' was the name the Norse explorers had given to the land they found to the south-west of Greenland, *vínber* being the Norse word for the grapes they had found there. The Vinland Map had turned up in Geneva in 1957, and had been bought by an American book dealer called Larry, an old friend of John's. It showed the island of Greenland, and next to it, a similar sized island labelled Vinland. What had shocked the world, especially

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the historians of Columbus's discovery of America, was that the map was supposed to have been drawn by an Italian cartographer in 1440, a full fifty years before Columbus's journey across the Atlantic.

The map had been bought by the millionaire Paul Mellon, who had donated it to the library at Yale. Since then the argument had raged, both in the academic world and among the fraternity of rare-book dealers, such as Emilio, and collectors, such as John.

'I know a few Vikings got lost a thousand years ago and washed up in Canada,' said Emilio. 'I'm not prejudiced against the map. I just know a fake when I see it.'

'But you haven't seen it!' said John. 'I have, and I can tell you it's genuine. And we both know Larry. He's a stand-up guy, I know he believes it's real.' John was leaning forward, his voice rising an octave, his hands chopping the air with frustration. But Nancy knew he was enjoying himself; he liked a good argument with Emilio.

Emilio sat back, his broad mouth twitching up in a half-smile. Everything about Emilio was broad: his brow, his cheekbones, his chin, his chest. He was short, compact, powerful. Nothing like Nancy's tall, stooped husband with his narrow shoulders and domed skull. John was beginning to act a little old, a little weak. Despite his greying hair, Emilio looked younger than his forty-nine years.

Nancy sipped her wine. She loved her husband very much; she always would.

But she was desperately attracted to Emilio.

She had known him for twenty years, ever since she had met him on the first of at least a dozen trips to Europe with John to seek out new items for John's collection of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century books. Emilio had taken them both out to dinner in Geneva, and a business relationship had soon turned into genuine friendship. During the following two decades Emilio's wife, never much present, had disappeared from the scene. She had retreated to Turin, where her parents lived, leaving Emilio to his books, his fabulous manor house in the hills of Tuscany,

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and his women. A son and a daughter shuttled between the two of them during university vacations.

Visiting Emilio had become the high point of the European trip for Nancy.

And also for John. John liked Emilio too.

'What about the ink?' said Emilio. 'I don't think the map is a fake because I'm Italian. I think it's a fake because it was drawn with modern ink!'

John shook his head, gulping his wine in frustration. It was true: science appeared to be on Emilio's side. Yale had sent the map for chemical analysis and the results had suggested that although the vellum was five hundred years old, the ink must have been manufactured after 1920 because it contained traces of anatase, a titanium compound only added to ink after that date. It was a conclusion John was just not prepared to accept.

'OK, there is anatase in the ink, but I was talking to a guy from the Bibliothèque nationale who said that anatase occurs naturally in some parts of Europe and there are dozens of authentic manuscripts from the fifteenth century with anatase in the ink. Larry says Yale is going to get the map re-examined by another lab.'

Nancy's attention drifted from the detailed discussion of the chemistry of inks, modern and medieval. She sat back, sipped her wine, and let the soft evening sun caress her face. The poplars above them rustled, and a breath of wind propelled a distinctive piquant scent to her nostrils. Capers. From the purple-flowering caper bushes growing out of Emilio's garden wall.

She watched the dark shadow thrown by the mountains ten miles away creep towards the house over the valley of speckled green in front of them. The lane, sweeping down from the house past the vineyard and a small field of sunflowers to the unseen stream at the valley's bottom, made a pleasing arc through the countryside. The composition was perfect, as though the landscape had been put together by an artist, rather than random geological mutations moulded by a hundred generations of landowners and peasants. Emilio's ancestors had been drinking their

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wine and admiring this view for centuries, probably as far back as the time when the Vinland Map was drawn.

Supposedly drawn.

'So what do you think, Nancy?' said Emilio. 'You're the one who really knows the Vikings.'

She was. Nancy Fishburn was a professor of history at a small college in Pennsylvania, where she specialized in the Viking age. She had read many times the two Vinland sagas – *The Saga of the Greenlanders* and *The Saga of Erik the Red* – that described the exploration of North America, and she had taught her students about the discovery of the Viking settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows in 1960. She had just finished writing a book on Gudrid the Wanderer, Erik the Red's daughter-in-law, an extraordinary woman who had been born in Iceland, got married in Greenland, had a son in Vinland and then returned to Iceland, before going on a pilgrimage to Rome.

'Scientists can change their minds. But in fifteenth-century Iceland, the discovery of Vinland was well known. And there were plenty of Europeans who fished and traded with the Icelanders then, especially the English; they would have brought that knowledge back to the mainland. A curious Italian cartographer could easily have heard of it.'

'You think so?' said Emilio, raising his eyebrows.

'Of course,' said Nancy. 'You know Columbus visited Iceland in 1477 on an English merchant ship? He mentioned it in a later letter to Ferdinand and Isabella.' The vast trove of old books about Columbus was one of Emilio's specialities. 'He would have heard about America then for sure. So why couldn't another Italian nearly forty years earlier?'

'Which would mean Columbus really didn't discover America,' said John with a note of triumph. 'He knew about it already!'

'Absurd!' said Emilio. 'You are not making any sense. And your glass is empty.'

They drank another two bottles of wine, gently arguing into the night.

Then they went to bed.

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Together.

Nancy paced up and down in the small kitchen and checked the clock above the stove yet again. Ten of five. She had calculated that JoÝ should be back from the island's little airport at a quarter of.

She smiled to herself. The excitement was pathetic for someone who was nearly fifty. The smile widened. But it was fun. She hadn't felt like this since, oh, since she was dating John.

A car slowed outside on the little street. She looked out of the kitchen window and saw the neighbours' Oldsmobile pull into the driveway of the cottage opposite. She spotted a wilting rose in her front yard. She grabbed the pruning shears, grateful for the opportunity to do something and to watch the road.

The front yard was looking good: a riot of peonies, zinnias, larkspur and hollyhocks penned in by the white picket fence, and the wonderful yellow rose that draped itself over their grey shingle cottage. They had owned the little house in Siasconset – or 'Sconset as it was known locally – for fifteen years now, and they both loved it. The garden was Nancy's particular joy, and she planned the blooms for July and August, the only time they could reliably spend on Nantucket. They would be shutting up the house on Saturday and heading back to Pennsylvania just in time for the fall semester.

The kids were already gone. Katie was staying with her cousins on the Cape, and they had just dropped Jonny off at Amherst a few days early for his sophomore year. Which meant it was just the two of them in the house.

And Emilio.

Nancy grinned again as she reached over to snip off the head of a browning blossom.

Because that time two months before in Tuscany had been the most mind-blowing night of sex Nancy could remember. And she was pretty sure that John felt the same way.

They hadn't talked about it since, not even that morning. They didn't need to: it was a wicked secret, shared, more exciting because unspoken.

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Emilio said he was bringing something very special for them. Something he had found in Rome. Nancy had no idea what it was, but she was intrigued, as was John.

She looked up at the sound of a car approaching down the street. It was their station wagon, with John at the wheel and Emilio next to him. She straightened and pushed a lock of her fair hair out of her eye. Emilio bounded out of the car, grinning as he held out his arms. They hugged. He was a couple of inches shorter than her, but his arms felt powerful behind her back.

There followed a bustle of chatter and of carrying things into the house. John fixed some daiquiris and soon they were outside in the back yard, around the wooden table under the maple.

'Your garden is as beautiful as ever, Nancy,' said Emilio.

Nancy could feel herself blushing at the compliment. 'Round here it has to be,' she said. 'Sconset's cottage gardens were famous, and you couldn't let the neighbours down.

'Well?' said John. 'Can we see it?'

'All right.' Emilio went back inside and emerged with a battered briefcase, which he put on the table. He reached into the case and extracted a pair of white cotton gloves, which he slipped on his hands. Then he pulled out a folder, inside which, wrapped in tissue, were three sheets of paper. Old, brown paper, covered in tiny writing.

'What does it say?' said John. 'Let me take a look. Is it in Italian?'

'Not quite.'

John bent over the manuscript. He had taught himself Italian and had become familiar with its linguistic development over the centuries.

'Hah!' he said. 'It's addressed to Bertomê. I can guess who it's from. Let me see.'

Emilio smiled and showed him the third page. 'I knew it!' said John. 'Christoffa! It's from Christopher Columbus to his younger brother Bartholomew!'

'That's right,' said Emilio.

John peered at the text. 'I can't really understand it. It's not Italian, is it?'

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'No it's Genoese, which is the dialect the Columbus brothers spoke to each other, although they rarely wrote in it. Here. I've translated it into English. That way, Nancy can understand it too.'

Emilio whipped out some crisp white typewritten sheets of paper, and laid them on the table. Nancy picked them up and began to read, with John looking over her shoulder.

'That's amazing,' John said.

Nancy read the three pages, fascinated. She wasn't a Columbine scholar, but it all sounded plausible to her. 'Wait,' she said. 'Those navigational instructions. That island. It's Nantucket!'

Emilio grinned. 'I thought you'd like that.'

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PART ONE

Iceland, 2017

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CHAPTER 1

EYGLÓ GAZED OVER the valley to the rank of mountains on the other side, a wall of bulging hard grey rock, flexing its muscles in scraps of August sunshine. The valley was broad, flattened by a series of volcanic floods caused by eruptions under the glacier a hundred kilometres to the south. A river, narrow at this spot, threaded its way through sand and meadows where multicoloured horses grazed, dozens of them. A raindrop fell on her nose. She ignored it. She immersed herself in the view. The place. She took a long slow breath. She smiled.

She spoke.

'This is the view Gudrid saw a thousand years ago. I am standing at Glaumbaer, in northern Iceland, the farm to which Gudrid came with her husband Thorfinn Karlsefni after so many years away from Iceland.'

Eygló turned and walked towards the back of a tiny church, clad in corrugated metal, squatting behind a row of turf-covered farmhouses.

'Of course, she had married Thorfinn in Greenland. And they brought back to Iceland with them their little son Snorri, the first European to be born in North America.'

Eygló turned to face left as she walked and talked. She was speaking English, in which she was fluent, but with soft esses and a clear Icelandic trill that English speakers seemed to love.

More raindrops on her nose. And on the far side of the church a large black cloud was rolling towards her from the west. She

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resisted the urge to gabble her way through the rest of her story before it burst upon her.

'Gudrid had travelled thousands of miles, farmed a new island – Greenland – explored a new continent – America – suffered shipwreck and attacks from Skraelings – what we now call Native Americans. It was here in Glaumbaer that Gudrid the Wanderer hoped to come to rest, to settle down with her small family.'

Eygló stopped. She was now in front of the church, next to a bronze sculpture of Gudrid standing in a ship with her infant Snorri on her shoulder. The drops were falling harder; Eygló resisted the temptation to wipe one from her eyebrow. She cocked her head to one side.

'But Gudrid's travels were not yet over. She had one more journey to take. A pilgrimage to Rome.'

The drops became a torrent. Eygló couldn't help hunching her shoulders, as the cold water flattened her spiky blonde hair.

'Cut!'

Eygló smiled with relief as Suzy, her English producer, waved them towards the church door.

'Let's get under cover!'

Eygló, Suzy, Tom the cameraman and Ajay the sound guy all ran to the shelter of the doorway, where a tall man was talking to a young woman with short dark hair, streaked with yellow. The woman hurried away as they approached.

'Can we use those takes?' Eygló asked.

'What do you think, Tom?' said Suzy. She hunched over Tom's camera, examining the digital images they had just captured.

Eygló stood next to the tall man, who was staring out at the turf farmhouses beside the churchyard: an eighteenth-century reincarnation of that Viking Glaumbaer farm, and now a folk museum.

'"It was here Gudrid the Wanderer hoped to come to rest,"' he said, sarcasm lacing his words. 'You have no idea what Gudrid hoped. For all you know, she wished she was back in Greenland shagging Erik the Red.'

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'You mean I should have said: "Gudrid stood here and dropped an earring, thereby spawning a hundred pages of bullshit in an archaeological journal ten centuries later"?'

'Ouch.'

Einar Thorsteinsson had been patronizing Eygló ever since she had first come across him when he was a graduate student and she an undergraduate at the University of Iceland. He was now a senior lecturer in archaeology at the university. Very tall, with longish blonde hair and a neatly trimmed beard, he was irredeemably pleased with himself. Eygló had to admit he had some right to be. He was a magician of the past: he could conjure a story out of the most obscure elements – physical elements. Ancient sites of dirt and tiny lumps of material spoke to him. The sagas less so.

And he could be *so* arrogant.

Gudrid and her son were getting very wet. Eygló liked the statue. Although it was consciously modern in an ancient place like this, it was lithe and elegant, evoking Gudrid as the young adventurous woman she was then, rather than the thousand-year-old Viking she had become today.

'You know Gudrid was a real person, Einar. And the sagas tell us enough to know what kind of person she was.'

'You're just guessing,' said Einar. 'It's make-believe.'

Suzy joined them. They had been speaking Icelandic and the Englishwoman hadn't understood them.

'The rain has screwed us,' Suzy said. 'We've still got to do a wide with Eygló against the mountains in the background, that's really important. We'll try again early tomorrow morning – we're going to have to shoot the whole lot again so we get the light consistent. According to my weather app it's fine until about midday, and this valley would look beautiful in morning sunlight. Do you think it will rain tomorrow, Einar?'

Einar didn't answer. Meteorology was beneath him.

'You can never be sure the forecast will be correct in Iceland,' said Eygló. 'But it's always worth a try.'

'OK, we come back tomorrow morning.'

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They walked back to the Land Cruiser that Suzy had hired. 'Who was that you were talking to?' Eygló asked Einar.

'Who?'

'The woman at the church door.'

'I don't know. Some tourist asking me whether it was open. Foreign.'

'Are you seeing her later? Showing her the Glaumbaer night-life?'

'Oh, Eygló, you do so misunderstand me,' Einar said. 'That kind of thing is long in my past.'

'Of course it is, Einar.'

Einar's womanizing was legendary; in fact, Eygló had witnessed it at first hand. He had been married for something like twelve years, but that hadn't stopped him. Eygló hadn't seen quite as much of him in recent times, but she doubted Einar would ever change.

A familiar scent tugged at her nostrils, sneaking its way through the fug of damp clothing. It was aftershave, a subtle perfume she remembered Einar bought in Paris. She remembered the night, or morning rather, when she had asked him about it, lying in his bare arms.

But that was a long time ago. And much best forgotten.

Suzy had booked them into one of Iceland's oldest hotels in the small town of Saudárkrókur, just a few kilometres north of Glaumbaer. Eygló smiled when she saw she had been given the *Gudrídur Thorbjarnardóttir* room, Gudrid's room, and she took a quick picture of the wooden door with her phone to tweet. It was the best room in the hotel.

She gazed out of the window towards the harbour, crowded with small fishing boats and a couple of trawlers, out to the fjord behind. She could just see the big rectangular block of rock that was the island of Drangey, moored a few kilometres offshore like a massive supertanker from a bygone age.

She flopped on the bed, pulled out her phone and called her son, who was excited by Liverpool's rumoured purchase of a new attacking midfielder from Arsenal and wanted to tell her all about

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it. It was coming up to the end of the transfer window for the new football season, one of Bjarki's favourite times of year, and Eygló just liked to hear the enthusiasm in his voice. He was staying with his cousins for a few days – yet another few days. Eygló thanked God she had a patient and helpful sister.

After they had finished, Eygló checked out the Arsenal player on her phone – it was important to be properly prepared for future conversations with her son – and then caught up on Twitter and Facebook. Since the success of *Viking Queens* in America earlier that year, Eygló's social media presence had exploded. Sometimes it was a chore, but actually she enjoyed the attention. And Suzy was keen for her to develop her fan base as widely as possible before *The Wanderer* was broadcast the following year.

She put down the phone and looked around her room. Old wooden furniture, old wooden beams. Elegant, cosy, expensive.

She grinned. This was her life now. She didn't know how long it was going to last, but she was going to enjoy it.

Because, mostly, her life had been crap. Eygló was an optimistic person, famous among her friends for her ability to put a sunny spin on the numerous bad things that seemed to happen to her. There had been a succession of bad men, including Hermann, her husband for two years. She loved history and felt she had real empathy for those Viking men and especially women who had lived in Iceland a thousand years before, but she wasn't brilliant at writing about them, at least in the dry, rigorous style that was expected of historians. She wasn't a total disaster – in fact she was just good enough to cling on to the academic world by her fingertips, first at the University of Iceland and then at York University in England, from where she had eventually been let go as a junior lecturer three years before. It was Einar who had hired her there, but once he left to return to Iceland, she had lost her protector.

The only undeniably good thing that had happened to her was Bjarki, who was now eleven, innocent and enthusiastic, and whose life was definitely not crap.

But in 2012 she had been put forward by her boss at York to be a talking head for a couple of minutes in a documentary on

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the history of Yorkshire produced by Suzy Henshaw. Eygló had spoken about the Vikings in York and had captivated Suzy, and later the BBC audience.

Two years later, Suzy had tracked Eygló down in Iceland, where she was working as a temporary high school history teacher, to front a new series called *Viking Queens* about the Norse women who had followed their men across Northern Europe.

It had been a massive success, not just for the BBC in the UK, but in Germany, Australia, Norway, Japan, America, and now, at last, Iceland. Moorhen Productions, Suzy's company, had done well, both financially and in terms of reputation.

Now, Suzy had asked Eygló to present a documentary series about Gudrid the Wanderer, who had emerged as the most popular of the Viking queens with the television audience. They had spent the previous two weeks filming in Nantucket and Newfoundland, and now they were in Iceland, covering Gudrid's childhood and her later years.

Eygló had suggested getting Einar involved: Eygló did the presenting, and Einar added the archaeological expertise. Einar looked good on camera, but his delivery was a little aloof, a cool expert rather than a passionate enthusiast.

Whereas Eygló brought Gudrid to life.

Eygló, Suzy and Einar had agreed to meet for dinner at eight-thirty in a restaurant in a blue building on Adalgata, the old main street lined with brightly coloured houses and shops, some dating back to the late nineteenth century. A pair of ravens swooped around the restaurant, croaking what sounded like an aggressive warning, before perching on the roof of the old store opposite. They unsettled Eygló: it was highly unusual for ravens to be seen in town in the summer. Her grandmother would have said it augured a hard winter, or something worse. Gudrid would no doubt have agreed.

Einar noticed Eygló's disquiet and guessed the reason for it. 'Oh, Eygló,' he said. 'They are only birds. Everyone pays far too much attention to ravens.'

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Eygló considered arguing with him, but actually she found his cynicism comforting. Einar believed he was in total control of his world; maybe she could learn something from him.

As usual Tom the cameraman didn't join them. He had gone off to find himself a more comfortable dive where the food would be cheaper and the beer more in evidence. He and Suzy had worked together for years, and Suzy had told Eygló and Einar not to take it personally. Tom was a loner, a former nature cameraman who just liked to be by himself. Or perhaps with a puffin.

Tom's surliness was difficult for Ajay, the shy young sound man. He was only twenty-one, a film-school student at a university in London doing a summer internship with Moorhen Productions. Tom was good at teaching Ajay his trade, but left the poor guy to fend for himself when not working. Eygló felt sorry for him, and had invited him to join her and the others, but Ajay had refused. Eygló hadn't pushed it.

'I looked through today's rushes with Tom,' said Suzy. 'We definitely must try again tomorrow.'

'Will you need me to do my bit again?' asked Einar.

'Absolutely.'

'So it's Snaefellsnes tomorrow night and we fly to Greenland on Friday?' It was Monday; they had three days left filming in Iceland.

'That's the plan,' said Suzy. Gudrid had been brought up on the Snaefellsnes peninsula in West Iceland, and then had sailed to Greenland, following the outlawed Erik the Red. They would be filming at Brattahlíd, Erik the Red's farm on the south-west corner of the island, and a couple of other places in Greenland in which Gudrid had spent some time. Eygló had only visited Greenland once before, and she was eager to return.

Then there was the trip to Italy to look forward to. After a few years in Glaumbaer, Gudrid had taken herself off on a pilgrimage to Rome. Which meant Eygló had to go there too, with Suzy and Tom, of course, but not Einar. Roman archaeology was not his thing. Eygló had never been to Italy; she wondered what kind of hotel she would be put up in there.

The restaurant was full of tourists – everywhere was in Iceland

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in the summer – and they had to wait to order. When the waitress finally arrived, Suzy asked for a bottle of Pinot Grigio with their food. Going on previous experience, that would be the first of two or three. Einar ordered foal, probably just to wind Suzy up, but the Englishwoman didn't seem to notice.

'Oh, I just got an email,' she said. 'Good news. Marco Beccari is going to join us on Snaefellsnes.'

'Well done!' said Eygló. Even Einar nodded his approval.

Marco Beccari was one of the few truly world-famous historians. An Italian, he had written an influential and highly readable book reassessing the late Renaissance and its effect on the New World. He was now a professor at Princeton, and his presence on their TV programme would give it credibility.

Because *The Wanderer* wasn't just a rehash of well-known facts about Gudrid. It contained a theory, and evidence, that would cause the world to rethink what it believed about the discovery of America.

Without Professor Beccari, the theory would be just another wild hypothesis. With him, the academic world would have to sit up and take notice. And the television audience would too.

Suzy left the restaurant a little early, complaining of an incipient migraine she wanted to nip in the bud. Eygló and Einar followed later, and Eygló went up to her room. There wasn't much else to do in Saudárkrókur, and they were waking up at six the following morning to head back to Glaumbaer.

Eygló checked her phone, and saw that her earlier tweets had somehow roused the ire of Hailey from Oakland who was convinced that all Vikings were rapists and was shocked that Eygló wouldn't accept that their 'queens' were in fact victims. Eygló entered the fray with gusto, thumbs flying over her phone's screen.

She paused to draw her curtains, and as she did so, she noticed a figure hurrying away from the hotel towards the church square. Einar. What's he up to? she wondered. But she was just glad he hadn't knocked on her door. Maybe he had changed after all.

*

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Suzy's app proved correct: the weather was beautiful the next day. They arrived at Glaumbaer at seven, a couple of hours before the museum opened. The sun was well above the horizon, having set for only a few hours at this time of year. The air was crisp after the previous night's rain, and there was a smell of cow manure coming from the twenty-first-century farm over the road.

Suzy decided to start where they had finished the day before, and Eygló repeated her words as she trod through the damp grass of the churchyard, following her own shadow in the sunshine. All around her birds sang and squabbled. She tried not to think of Einar's cynicism as she spoke; Gudrid was real to her, so real Eygló felt she knew her.

She turned to face Tom, and as she did so she thought she caught something in her peripheral vision, by the back of the church. But she prided herself on her professionalism and the lack of retakes she required, and so she kept talking.

'Cut,' said Suzy as Eygló finished her last sentence. 'How does that look, Tom?'

As Suzy and Tom examined his camera, Eygló turned to focus on the object she had seen. It was a pair of legs, clad in jeans, stretching out from behind the church.

She walked towards the legs, anxiety building. Could someone have picked this spot to bed down for the night? A tourist who was lost or drunk or both?

Or was it something else? Something worse.

It was.

A small, simple apse of corrugated metal stuck out from the back of the church, and behind it a young woman lay splayed on the grass, face inches from the corner made by the apse and the wall, the back of her head a bloody mess.

Eygló screamed.

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CHAPTER 2

MAGNUS CURSED, SWERVED and hit the horn as a black BMW X5 roared past him through the fog. After five years away, he was back in the land of elves and idiot drivers.

He was on that famous stretch of road through a patch of lava on the way to Álftanes that had been diverted around a couple of rocks inhabited by the local hidden people, so as not to disturb them. Álftanes was a small town on a headland just outside Reykjavík, and Magnus had been called out to a report of an assault on a householder who had surprised a burglar. It was not the most serious of crimes, but then there were not that many serious crimes in Reykjavík. In fact, in the month he had been back, Magnus had investigated precisely none.

He approached a large brown wooden house – large by Icelandic standards anyway – that stood on a small point apart from its more modern one-storey concrete neighbours, facing out into grey folds of fog and sea. The flashing lights of two police cars and an ambulance pierced the mist. As Magnus pulled up behind one of the police cars, two paramedics climbed into the ambulance and it drove off.

Magnus didn't recognize the uniformed police constable at the door to the house. He introduced himself. She appeared to have heard of him – it seemed that every police officer in Iceland had, despite Magnus's recent absence from the country.

'The victim is Tryggvi Thór Gröndal,' she said. 'Seventy-one. He was hit on the head and knocked unconscious. He's a

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stubborn bastard. Refused to go to hospital *and* he declines to press charges.'

'Why?'

I don't know,' said the constable with frustration. 'Claims the attack was nothing. See if you can get him to change his mind.'

She led Magnus into the house and through to a large living room with a wide picture window looking out on to the fog. On the sofa in front of the window sat an old man, his head swathed in a bandage. In an armchair opposite, a bald uniformed police officer whom Magnus thought he had met before was taking notes. A red-haired woman in her thirties hovered behind the old man. She didn't look happy.

The old man glanced up at Magnus as he entered, deep brown eyes under thick black eyebrows. His face was lined, but despite the wound and his age, he didn't seem frail at all. He seemed strong. And determined.

A stubborn bastard.

With a bruise forming on his cheek, Magnus noticed.

'Ah, a detective! I'm sorry, you have wasted your trip. No crime to solve here.' He had a deep, rich voice that commanded attention.

Magnus ignored him and smiled politely. 'Inspector Magnús Ragnarsson, of Reykjavík CID. Your name is Tryggvi Thór?'

The man grunted.

The bald constable stood up, and Magnus took his place opposite the victim.

'I know you will have told my colleagues what happened, but would you mind repeating it for me?'

'No need,' said the man. His expression was firm and defiant, but Magnus thought he detected a hint of amusement in the old man's eyes.

The woman sighed. She had brown eyes, freckles and a wide mouth with thick lips, the corners of which were pointing down. No amusement there. Her nose ended in a little hook, just like the man on the sofa. She was wearing a white top, a green jacket, smart trousers and subtle silver jewellery. Business clothes. She looked good, Magnus thought. She also looked grumpy.

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'I need to go to work,' she said to Magnus. 'Can I leave him to you?'

'Just a moment,' said Magnus. 'Are you Tryggvi Thór's daughter?' He was guessing, given her age and resemblance.

'Yes, my name is Sóley. I dropped by to see Dad this morning on my way in from the airport – I flew in from Brussels this morning. I discovered him on the floor just there.' She pointed to a spot near the desk. There were dark specks on the rug. Blood. 'He was barely conscious, so I called the ambulance. And you lot.'

There was a surprising tinge of contempt in the woman's voice as she uttered these last words. Surprising, because in Magnus's experience the police were usually treated with respect in Iceland, especially by the professional classes.

'Was the door unlocked?'

'It's always unlocked.'

Magnus nodded. 'Did you see anyone leaving the house? Or watching it?'

'No.'

'How about a car?'

'No, I don't think so. I don't know. I wasn't looking, I can't remember. I may have passed a car on the road on the way here; it is a road, after all.' She pursed her lips. 'I don't know why you bother asking me these questions. Dad doesn't want you to investigate whoever attacked him, and even if he did, you wouldn't do anything.'

Magnus frowned. 'Why do you say that, Sóley?'

Sóley just shook her head. 'Can I go now? I really will be late for a meeting.'

'Can I have your contact details?' Magnus said. 'A card, perhaps?' Sóley looked like the sort of woman who would have a card.

Sure enough, she did. Magnus studied it. She worked in the Foreign Ministry, with an impressive title.

'Thank you. We will contact you later, if necessary.'

The woman stooped towards her father as if to kiss him, seemed to think better of it, and left the house.

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'Hah!' said Tryggvi Thór. 'That's all you will get out of her.'

Magnus ignored the old man. He stood up and wandered around the living room, examining the windows, the desk in the corner, the photo frames on the shelves, the floor. He paused at the desk. A couple of empty plastic folders lay among a mess of papers.

Magnus never could resist a challenge. There was something going on here and he was going to find out what.

He told the two constables to leave him alone with Tryggvi Thór, and after he had seen them out to their patrol car, returned to the sofa and stared at the man. Who stared back. A full minute passed.

'What did he take?' Magnus asked eventually.

'He didn't take anything.'

'How do you know? Have you checked?'

The old man didn't answer.

'Can you check now?'

'Maybe later.'

'You should check your desk. He took something from your desk. It's a mess; the rest of the house is very tidy – you're a tidy person. The question is: Did the intruder take valuables? Or papers? Something he could sell? Or information?'

Magnus held those deep brown eyes. Intelligent eyes. He could feel that the old man was restraining the urge to speak to him. Magnus waited.

'You are not a bad detective,' Tryggvi Thór said at last. 'But I don't have to answer these questions. I said I don't want you to press charges.'

'Why doesn't your daughter like the police?'

More staring. Then a grunt. 'Would you like some coffee?'

'Thank you.'

The old man stood up and moved through to the kitchen. He gasped and touched his head. Magnus ignored the urge to offer to help. If the old man was that stubborn he could make the coffee on his own.

Magnus waited on the living-room sofa. Outside, the fog

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was lifting to reveal a calm sea of slate grey and the gritty black Reykjanes peninsula stretching away to the west. The perfect cone of the small Keilir mountain thrust upwards through the remnants of the mist. A lovely view. A lovely house, in fact.

Tryggvi Thór returned with two mugs of coffee and some cakes. The perfect host.

'You must be the Kani Cop?'

Magnus nodded. It was a nickname he had picked up amongst his colleagues on his last stint in Iceland. *Kani* was slang for American. 'How have you heard of me?'

'I have friends in the police. I thought you had left Iceland?'

'I did. I went back to my old job as a homicide detective in the States.'

'Where was that?'

Magnus hesitated before answering. Wasn't he supposed to be the one asking the questions? But, strangely, he was enjoying talking to this man. And maybe he would get something in return.

'Boston. I was born in Reykjavík but was brought up in America from the age of twelve. I came back to Iceland in 2009. Left three years later.'

'But you couldn't stay away?'

'It's not that simple.'

'It never is,' said the old man. 'How long have you been back?'

'Five weeks. I get thrown out of my hotel room tomorrow.'

'Have you got anywhere to go?'

'I think so. It's been a nightmare trying to find somewhere. Things have changed since I was last here: the whole city seems to have been taken over by Airbnb and there is nothing left for anyone else. I think I've found a room in Breidholt – I'm waiting to hear.'

They sipped their coffee in silence for a moment.

'You know I can insist that we investigate this attack,' said Magnus. 'Whoever did this is a threat to other people. Your neighbours. I can get in a forensic team to examine your house. Make sure everything is covered in a nice layer of fingerprint dust.'

'No you couldn't,' said Tryggvi Thór.

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'Why not?'

'Because without my cooperation you would never make the case. The prosecutor wouldn't take it on. Your boss wouldn't allow you to waste the time. And the money.'

There was something in that. Magnus's boss, Detective Superintendent Thelma, prided herself on her efficient use of the department's limited budget.

Magnus examined the man opposite him. He knew a lot about the internal workings of the Metropolitan Police. 'So when did you retire from the police department, Tryggvi Thór?'

The old man grunted. 'Nineteen ninety-six. Over twenty years ago. Like you, I left Iceland.'

'Africa?' All living rooms in Iceland were heavily populated with family photographs, and Tryggvi Thór's was no exception. Magnus had spotted several pictures of Tryggvi Thór in a much hotter climate, in many of which he was accompanied by a black woman with a mischievous smile, maybe twenty years younger than him.

'Uganda. I only came back last year.'

'With your wife?'

'No. Charity died. Cancer. She was fifty-two. That's why I returned. We had run a school together, but when she died, I gave it up. My mother also died last year and left this house empty. It was where I grew up; I decided I'd rather live in it than sell it.'

'I'm sorry about your wife,' said Magnus. 'And your mother too.' He drained his coffee. 'Are you sure you won't cooperate? I wasn't kidding. This guy, whoever he was, might try again with one of your neighbours.'

'I think the neighbours are safe,' said Tryggvi Thór.

'Why do you say that?'

Tryggvi Thór said nothing.

'This wasn't a random attack, was it?' Magnus said. 'Someone came here who you knew. You let them in, they beat you up and then they took something. And you know why. But you're not telling me. Perhaps you're scared? I'd be surprised. Perhaps you're hiding something that you don't want coming to light? More likely. Something illegal?'

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The old man was looking at him steadily.

'Something illegal?' Magnus repeated the question. He was looking for a tiny nod. Or a shake of the head.

The old man didn't move a muscle.

'All right,' Magnus said. 'I can't waste any more of my time here.' He got to his feet and fished out a card. 'But if you change your mind, or …' He hesitated. '… if you think you are about to get another visit, give me a call.'

Tryggvi Thór took the card and hauled himself out of his chair, wincing as he did so. He saw Magnus to the front door.

'You know,' he said as Magnus stepped outside. 'You can always stay here, if you like. There is just me in the house, and there's plenty of room.'

Magnus turned in surprise. Tryggvi Thór raised his eyebrows. He meant it.

Odd.

'No, that's OK, thanks,' Magnus said. 'As I told you, I think I've lined up somewhere in Breidholt.'

'Well, if you prefer there to here, that's your choice.' And the old man shut the door.

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CHAPTER 3

THE FOG HAD lifted as Magnus drove along the narrow isthmus between Álftanes and Reykjavík. To his left stood the large farmstead of Bessastadir, the official residence of the president of Iceland, a collection of white buildings and a church alone in a meadow. Behind that, across a narrow body of water, rose the jumble of white and grey buildings that was the capital, crowned by the smooth grey concrete missile of the Hallgrímskirkja spire on top of its little hill. Mount Esja, behind the city, was still shrouded in cloud. The desolate black lava flow of the Reykjanes peninsula stretched away to the right. On both sides of the road, the sea glistened and glimmered in the newly liberated sunshine.

Iceland looked washed, clean and pristine. For a moment, Magnus felt his spirits rise. Maybe he had made the correct decision to return after all.

He had been brought over to Iceland from Boston's Homicide Unit at the request of the National Police Commissioner in 2009 to help the Reykjavík Metropolitan Police deal with the big-city international crime that the Commissioner feared was going to become more prevalent in the capital. As America's only Icelandic-speaking homicide detective, he was uniquely qualified for the job. And Magnus had done as he had been asked, breaking a number of difficult cases. The secondment was meant to have been for a two-year period, but Magnus had got an extension to three years. Then things had fallen apart with his girlfriend, Ingileif, and Magnus had returned to Boston.

There, life had been tougher than he had expected. Ever since

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he had first arrived in America as a child, Magnus had never been sure whether he was Icelandic or American. The three-year stint in Iceland hadn't helped that: he had just become more confused.

But the real problem was Magnus's father.

It was Magnus's father, a professor of mathematics, who had brought Magnus and his little brother Ollie over to America when his mother died. And it was Magnus's father who had propelled Magnus into the police department.

Because, when Magnus was twenty, his father had been murdered in the small town of Duxbury just south of Boston. The police had failed to find the killer and, after years of trying, so had Magnus. Which was why he had joined the Boston Police Department and become a homicide detective. He was very good at his job: it was as if every murder was his father's murder.

Then, in Iceland, he had finally figured out how his father had died and the people who had been responsible. One way or another they had been brought to justice.

In many ways, many important ways, this had brought relief. Relief from the anger, the disequilibrium, the feeling that life was not quite right, that had gnawed at Magnus since he was twenty. But it had also dampened his obsession for the job, tramping the streets of South Boston from one murder to the next. He was still a good detective, but he had lost his edge. If a case was too difficult, if he had worked through all the angles and still not made a breakthrough, he would let it go. Move on. He would never have done that in the past, before he had resolved his father's murder.

Without his all-consuming desire to solve every crime that came his way, the downsides of the job became more apparent. The long hours, the endless paperwork, the human misery.

And, without Ingileif, without the enthusiasm to find another Ingileif, he was lonely.

When the National Police Commissioner called him one morning, asking Magnus to return to Iceland on a permanent basis, Magnus politely refused.

Then he called again. And a third time.

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The third time was the day after Magnus had visited his little brother Ollie, who only had four more months to go at the Massachusetts correctional facility at Norfolk and was eager to right what he considered to be past wrongs as soon as he got out.

Those past wrongs involved Magnus, at least as far as Ollie was concerned.

So the third time the Commissioner called, Magnus said yes.

Things had changed in Iceland. When he had left, the country was still struggling with the damage caused by the financial crash of 2008 that had almost bankrupted it. Now the economy was booming, fuelled by an unprecedented influx of tourists and Icelanders' ability to look to the future with optimism. Much of this optimism had led to more borrowing, more expensive SUVs bought with other people's money, more speculative buildings going up. So maybe things hadn't changed after all.

Magnus returned to his old department within CID with the rank of detective inspector. Baldur, the previous head of the Violent Crimes Unit, had been promoted to head up Traffic, and had been replaced by Detective Superintendent Thelma Reynisdóttir. Magnus's old colleague Vigdís was still there, still a detective constable, but Árni had got married, been promoted to detective sergeant and moved north to Akureyri. Magnus didn't know whether Vigdís's failure to be promoted was because she was black or because she was a woman. He did know it was not because she wasn't good enough.

He wondered what she would make of Tryggvi Thór. Magnus was sure he was hiding something. He knew who had attacked him, and he knew why.

Normally when someone didn't want to press charges after they were assaulted it was because there was some kind of criminal activity lurking in the background which they didn't want to be uncovered. Drugs, usually, possibly people trafficking, something involving organized crime or gangs. A turf war, an unpaid debt, a contractual dispute.

Magnus would be very surprised if Tryggvi Thór was involved in organized crime. But that was the most logical explanation.

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Although Magnus knew that it was traditional Icelandic hospitality to give wandering strangers a bed, he still thought it odd that Tryggvi Thór had offered him a room in his house. Despite Tryggvi Thór's refusal to cooperate, there had certainly been a connection between them, a mutual respect, but they had only met each other once. On the other hand, Magnus had only met the shopkeeper in Breidholt who was offering to rent out his room once. Breidholt was a dreary suburb to the south-east of the centre. Bits of it were pleasant, but not the bit where Magnus would be living.

Perhaps Tryggvi Thór wanted Magnus to help him. Or protect him from another attack.

It was a nice house. Magnus liked Álftanes. And he was intrigued by Tryggvi Thór.

He regretted not taking the task of apartment-hunting a bit more seriously. The hotel he was staying at, which had been paid for by the Metropolitan Police for a month, was adamant about throwing him out the next day. So Breidholt beckoned.

His phone rang. He checked the caller: Thelma, his boss. He answered: 'Magnús.'

'Where are you?'

'Kópavogur, on my way back to headquarters.'

'Well, come and see me as soon as you get in. A tourist has been murdered in the north and Akureyri need some help.'

'All right. Where?'

'Glaumbaer.'

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