

## Praise for *Someone To Watch Over Me*

‘Yrsa Sigurdardóttir is ensconced at or near the summit of Nordic crime writing, and the lawyer Thóra Guðmundsdóttir is an appealing heroine full of real-life problems. *SOMEONE TO WATCH OVER ME* is Sigurdardóttir’s most ambitious, deepest novel, less reliant on the Icelandic landscape, more concerned with damaged minds’ *The Times*

‘It is a striking fact that disabled people rarely take centre stage in crime fiction . . . So it feels as if the Icelandic writer Yrsa Sigurdardóttir is breaking taboos when she sets her new novel in a care home that is burnt down by a fire in which five of the six residents are killed . . . A tough but moving novel, with an unusual plot and characters’ *The Sunday Times*

‘Grimly compelling . . . a finely drawn portrait of a nation in shock’ *Mail On Sunday*

‘A taut and grisly crime drama guaranteed to make you shudder’ *Irish Tatler*

## Praise for Yrsa Sigurdardóttir’s previous novels

‘Iceland’s answer to Stieg Larsson’ *Daily Telegraph*

‘Stands comparison with the finest contemporary crime writing anywhere in the world’ *TLS*

‘A fascinating setting and realistic characters make this an engrossing read’ *Metro*

‘She is entitled to join the front ranks of Nordic crime writers’ *The Times*

‘Spooky and gruesome . . . chilling and witty’ *Spectator*

‘The numerous twists and turns are worthy of Agatha Christie’ *Sunday Telegraph*

Also by Yrsa Sigurdardóttir

*Last Rituals*  
*My Soul to Take*  
*Ashes to Dust*  
*The Day is Dark*  
*I Remember You*

*About the Author*

Yrsa Sigurdardóttir works as a civil engineer in Reykjavik. Her books for children have won prizes and great acclaim. *Someone to Watch Over Me* is her sixth adult novel.

*About the Translator*

Philip Roughton is a highly respected translator of Icelandic literature, having translated works by the Nobel Prize winner Halldór Laxness, among others. He lives in Reykjavik.

# Someone to Watch Over Me

*Yrsa Sigurdardóttir*

Translated from the Icelandic by Philip Roughton

  
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This novel is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother,  
Vilborg G. Guðjónsdóttir  
(4 November 1909–24 July 1982).

—Yrsa



# Preface

Saturday, 8 November 2008

The cat was keeping a low profile, concealing itself in the darkness behind the dense but leafless bushes. It crouched there, motionless, the only movement its yellow eyes flickering back and forth; its defences were up against whatever else shared the night. The humans who used to feed it had long since forgotten it, and the cat knew there were things hidden in the dark that didn't come out in daylight. It always made itself invisible as the hush of night descended, when people let down their guard as the shadows either vanished or took over, depending on your point of view. The cat still hadn't made up its mind which it was, and it didn't care: it liked this time of day, even though its hackles rose from time to time in anticipation of the unexpected, of whatever bad thing was just around the corner. Everything that hated the light was now set free; the dark corners merged with their surroundings, all around was darkness and solitude.

A dull cracking sound made the cat flex its claws into the damp, cold soil. It couldn't see anything but still it resisted drawing attention to itself, breathing more shallowly and pressing its scrawny body as flat to the ground as possible. The cold air, which moments before had felt so refreshing after a day sleeping on the sofa, became oppressive, and each inhalation left an unpleasant flavour on the creature's rough tongue. Inadvertently, it hissed low in its throat, and

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frantically tensed itself to spring away from the terrible thing that was there somewhere but invisible, like the owners of the voices on the radio of the people it shared the house with. Suddenly the cat turned, darted out from under the bushes and ran as fast as its feet could carry it, away from the house.

Berglind sat up in bed, wide awake. When she woke in the middle of the night it usually happened gradually, while she tossed and turned in search of the perfect sleeping position. But this time she'd seemed to jolt awake from a deep sleep, feeling as if she hadn't slept at all. It was completely dark in the master bedroom and outside was a pitch-black, starless sky. The illuminated hands on the alarm clock revealed that it was just gone three thirty. Had she been woken by crying from the child's room? Berglind listened carefully, but heard only the low ticking of the alarm clock and her husband's heavy breathing.

Berglind pushed back the duvet, taking care not to wake Halli. He'd had enough to put up with these past few months and the last thing she wanted was to disturb him. Although the holy men seemed to have done their job well, she didn't dare to hope the matter was settled so soon after their visit. But she couldn't express that to her husband, or to anyone else, in case people thought she was doing it for attention and ended up doubting her word – or rather, doubting it even more – over what had happened recently. Even Halli, who had experienced it all with her, had tried to find rational explanations, but most of them were so unlikely as to be ridiculous. He had never fully accepted her theories, although over time he stopped objecting to them, since nothing else seemed possible as the strange events kept multiplying. Still,



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it was to Halli's credit that he had held back and tried his best to support her, despite the cracks that had formed in the foundations of their marriage. They weren't on the home straight yet; their problems were far from over, although at least one of their biggest issues seemed to be behind them now. At work Halli's hours had been cut back and seemed unlikely to be reinstated, and although Berglind's job as a civil servant was supposedly secure there were financial issues there, too. Who knew, perhaps she would be next to suffer from the cutbacks.

Berglind's eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness and she got out of bed carefully. There was no point lying back down yet. She would have a glass of water and check Pési was sound asleep; hopefully then she would be tired again. Otherwise she would play a couple of hands of solitaire on the computer or surf the Internet until her eyelids started drooping. Long ago she'd mastered the art of distracting herself with pointless and repetitive tasks in order to restore her peace of mind. Otherwise she would never have been able to stay in the house so long. Berglind shut the bedroom door behind her, trying not to let the hinges creak. They had been planning to replace all the doors when they bought the house, but they'd never got round to it. The hallway was cold as ice; the chilly tiles made the soles of her feet tingle and she regretted not having stopped to look for her slippers. In her heart she knew she never would have; it would be a long time before she could bring herself to poke around in the darkness under the bed. Hopefully it would happen. No, not *hopefully*, it *had* to. Otherwise she would lose her mind.

The water in the kitchen tap was lukewarm so she let it run for a while as she stared out at the familiar street and

the houses opposite. The road was shrouded in darkness, although it looked like someone had forgotten to turn off the light in the garage directly opposite. Presumably a window had been left open as well, because a bare light bulb swung there slowly, as if in a gentle breeze. Otherwise the row of houses was dark. The yellowish gleam from the streetlight did not spread to the front gardens, but died out at the edge of the pavement where the shadows took over. Berglind looked downhill, across rooftops, ignoring the running water as she let her eyes wander along to where Vesturlandsvegur Road turned up towards the suburb of Kjalarnes. She let go of the tap and rubbed the goose bumps on her upper arm. A car drove along the main road and she thought she could hear its engine whine as it splashed through the rain-filled tyre ruts. Had they been there since the accident? The weather hadn't been like this, that night. The road was in need of repair, but it wouldn't happen any time soon. Berglind dragged her gaze away from the window and stuck a glass under the stream of water.

If only they'd turned down the invitation to the Christmas buffet. She didn't ask herself if she was only thinking this in hindsight; in her mind they had never wanted to go in the first place, but they had let friends persuade them. If this hadn't been the case, she didn't want to admit it; it was easier to deal with the consequences if it was someone else's fault that they had dressed up, asked Magga to babysit, and gone along. They hadn't used a babysitter since then, and didn't intend to. Their social life was now restricted to their home or places where they could take their four-year-old son.

She just couldn't imagine enjoying an evening out knowing he was at home with a babysitter, not since that terrible night

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and everything that had happened since. For the thousandth time she thought to herself that everything would have gone differently if they'd skipped the Christmas buffet altogether, or at least if they hadn't decided to have a drink at home to avoid having to buy one at the restaurant. But thinking that way only rubbed salt in the wound. They had accepted the invitation, and they had made childcare arrangements. Berglind's eyes automatically went back to the window and she stared at the black tarmac of Vesturlandsvegur Road, which ran like a dark, currentless river along the edge of the neighbourhood. She closed her eyes and immediately saw the image she'd been faced with that fateful night. The flashing lights of the ambulance and the police cars had eclipsed both the Christmas lights on the roof of the house opposite and the heavy snow that was falling. The tiny white lights, which should have stood for peace on Earth and the hope of a new year, could not compete with the bright colours flashing from the vehicles. With the same hindsight she had used to convince herself they'd initially planned not to go to the dinner, Berglind now told herself that at the time she had immediately connected the accident on Vesturlandsvegur Road to their babysitter Magga, who hadn't yet shown up.

She opened her eyes and gulped down the water. It was still a bit warm and she regretted not having let the tap run even longer. Recently everything she did seemed tinged with regret, not that one could compare the temperature of drinking water to the death of a young girl, and not that the accident had been her fault. Nevertheless she felt terribly guilty. Magga's parents, who they'd met several times after the accident, had been devastated, and the look on their faces would haunt both Berglind and Halli for the rest of their

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lives, if not longer. Of course no one blamed them for the accident, at least not openly, but Berglind thought she could see in the mother's anguished eyes the belief that they were responsible in some way – if they had to go out, why hadn't they gone to pick Magga up? If they'd just made the effort to come and collect her, the girl wouldn't have been crossing the road, and would still be alive now. But because they had let themselves be persuaded to go out, Magga had been in the wrong place at the wrong time and some heartless bastard had run her over. He probably hadn't even looked back, let alone stopped to help the child crumpled in the street. Neither driver nor car had been traced; there had been no other traffic on that part of the road when the accident occurred, and no witnesses came forward despite repeated requests in the media. So Magga died alone, abandoned on the icy tarmac; she had stopped breathing by the time the driver of the next car spotted her and stopped. It was lucky he hadn't run over her as well, since a thin layer of snow had already covered her small body. Berglind squeezed her eyes shut again and rubbed them with her damp fingers. How wide was a car? Six feet? Nine? The girl had been at least half a mile away from their house, if not a mile. Such a random twist of fate, to have been on that exact spot in the road when that despicable driver showed up. She was too tired to try to calculate the odds but knew they must be tiny. When you thought about it, the odds of bad news always seemed to get exaggerated more than good, no matter how unlikely the event; hardly anyone won the lottery, but loads of people contracted rare, fatal diseases in unlikely ways.

Berglind opened her eyes again and drained the glass of water. Although the accident still haunted her, the hardest

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part hadn't been dealing with the tragic death of a girl who'd had so much to live for. That part of it was logical, at least: when a girl weighing not much more than seven stone meets a ton of steel travelling at over sixty miles an hour, there can only be one outcome. Of course it was a terrible tragedy, but the possibility of sudden death was part of the human condition. It had been harder to come to terms with what had happened next: Magga – or rather some sort of projection of her spirit – seemed to have resolved to keep her promise to take care of Pési, and came to watch over him whenever dusk fell. Perhaps the violence of her death had left her spirit unable to rest in peace? As far as Berglind could glean from the few horror movies she'd seen, people returned as ghosts if their deaths were unresolved. At first she and Halli hadn't understood what was going on, assuming when Pési said Magga was with him that he had been affected by hearing them talking about the accident. He was too young to understand death, so it seemed probable that he was trying to make sense of her disappearance. It was only natural that Pési missed her; she'd been babysitting for them since he was one and he was very attached to her. But alarm bells rang for Berglind when the boy began repeating over and over that Magga felt poorly and that everything was *all hurty*. That's when Berglind first started listening to him properly, trying to overcome the numbness that had consumed her since the accident. With all the inexplicable and frightening things that had happened since the accident, she no longer doubted what was going on.

It had grown colder in Pési's room, with condensation forming on the windows as soon as darkness fell. Turning up the thermostat had made no difference, and the plumber they

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called stood and scratched his head for an hour before leaving them in exactly the same boat but with a hefty bill. An old mobile that hung over the boy's bed, one they'd meant to get rid of long ago, moved even when there was no breeze, and there were continual electrical disturbances just in that one room: the light flickered constantly, no matter how often they changed its bulb. The air in the room would begin to feel dense and heavy towards the end of the day, even if they opened the window. It was as if all the oxygen had been sucked out of it, and every breath left behind a disagreeable metallic taste. Of course, this could all have had a logical explanation that time and patience would help them discover. The house was old and needed a lot of work. However, some of the phenomena couldn't possibly be attributed to that: Pési's pile of cuddly toys was always arranged in a neat row in the morning; they'd find his clothing folded on a stool in the corner, even if it had been lying in a heap on the floor when he went to sleep. Pési often woke up in the night, but now they didn't need to fetch him a drink, take him into their bed to sleep or go to his room to calm him down, because when they went to check on him they would find him smiling in bed, saying: 'You didn't have to get up, Magga is looking after me.'

This sometimes led them to take him into their own bed, but the girl's spirit seemed not to like this. The family frequently woke to find the duvet slipping slowly off them and down onto the floor. A scraping sound would come from under the bed; it always started quietly, then suddenly intensified into violent scrabbling. The sound would cease when Halli peered under the bed, muttering sleepily about the bloody mice, although they had never seen a single mouse.

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The chill they had noticed in Pési's room was now manifesting in the master bedroom, along with the condensation on the windowpanes and the electrical disturbances. On top of this, little dark puddles had started forming in the doorway; they looked like blood in the semi-darkness, but turned out to be water when the lights were turned on. Twice they called carpenters to search the roof for leaks; neither of them found anything.

It was incredible, really, how long they had suffered all this with only tradesmen to help them. One morning Berglind announced that she couldn't take it any more; the house would be put up for sale immediately, never mind the recession and the declining property market. That morning they'd woken to find some of their clothes hanging on the outside of their wardrobe. And not just random items: Halli's smart suit, a shirt and tie inside it, and one of Berglind's dresses, with a matching bolero jacket. The outfits they had been wearing the evening of the Christmas buffet. There had been nothing there when they had gone to sleep. Berglind's fear was intensified by the fact that for the first time since this had all started, Halli seemed as frightened as her. Instead of trying to sell the house at the worst possible time, they decided to bring in a medium to try to get rid of the ghost – or whatever this was. As Halli had pointed out, they couldn't even be sure that selling the property would help, since the ghost seemed to be haunting Pési, not the house.

They hired a medium who said that he could sense a tormented and unhappy soul hanging around Pési, but that he didn't know how to free them from its presence. The same went for the psychic woman they called next, who came with an enthusiastic recommendation from Berglind's aunt. Neither

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of them reached this conclusion free of charge, and the household's finances weren't robust enough for Berglind and Halli to work their way through the relevant column in the classified ads. Their last resort was the parish priest, whom they hadn't seen since Pési's christening. At first the man was reluctant, perhaps suspecting he was the butt of some sort of joke. However, Berglind's helpless terror must have been clear as soon as he saw her; the priest's attitude changed, though he told them he couldn't promise anything. Over the course of several visits he experienced the cold that seemed to surround Pési at dusk, and the static electricity in the air around the child. The priest called in the bishop, and together they performed Iceland's first exorcism in over a century. After going from room to room, the bishop had announced to them ceremoniously that the spirit of the girl would no longer enter their home. And by some miracle, it seemed to have worked.

As if a magic wand had been waved, it was immediately different in the house, though it was hard to pinpoint what exactly had changed. The atmosphere at home felt like it used to. Of course it would be difficult to rid themselves of the constant fear that something was about to happen, and it would doubtless take time for their hands to stop trembling. But time healed all wounds, and Berglind thought to herself now that she would settle for a slow but steady recovery.

The parquet creaked upstairs, in Pési's room. Berglind put down her glass and turned around slowly. The sound continued, as though the boy was walking around. Her mouth went dry and her goose bumps sprang up again. She was ridiculous, still jumping at shadows. With measured steps she climbed the stairs, and when she reached the door to her son's room she could hear his muffled voice inside. She wanted to



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put her ear to the door and listen, but instead she opened it calmly. Pési was standing on tiptoe at the window, looking out. He stopped talking and turned around when he heard the door open, and Berglind's hand flew to her mouth when she saw the condensation on the windowpane.

'Hello, Mummy.' Pési smiled at her sadly.

Berglind hurried to her son and pulled him forcefully from the window. She held him close and tried at the same time to wipe the windowpane. But the haze couldn't be wiped away. It was on the outside of the glass.

Pési looked up at her. 'Magga's outside. She can't get in. She wants to look after me.' He pointed at the window and frowned. 'She's a little bit angry.'

# Chapter 1

Monday, 4 January 2010

The building looked quite ordinary from the road. Tourists probably assumed it was just another farm where men toiled and sweated happily, at peace with God and the world. Perhaps they thought it was an unusually large and imposing family home, but either way they wouldn't have dwelled on it too long and probably wouldn't have looked back once they had passed it. Actually, it was just as likely that Icelanders thought much the same, but the place hardly ever came up in conversation; the rare times it was mentioned in the press, it was usually because something tragic had happened to one of the poor unfortunates inside. As they always do, readers would have skimmed over the general details in search of the juicier parts that described the most shocking and bizarre aspects of the residents' behaviour, then skipped ahead in the hope of finding something more positive. After closing the paper it was unlikely they would retain much information about the place or its inhabitants; it was easier to forget about people like them. Even within the system there was a tendency to sideline the unit; certainly people understood the value of the work they did there, but there seemed to be a silent consensus among government officials to have as little to do with it as possible.

Thóra was sure that if they'd had more work at the law firm right then, she might have turned down the case that

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had brought her here. Of course, it was possible that her curiosity about the vaguely worded assignment would have made her take it on even if she were busy – it wasn't every day that an inmate of the Secure Psychiatric Unit at Sogn requested her assistance.

Actually, the history of the SPU was short; until 1992 prisoners with mental health problems had either been placed in institutions abroad or simply kept among the general population at Litla-Hraun prison. Neither option was ideal. In the first eventuality the language barrier must have caused patients untold hardships, not to mention the distance from their family and friends; and in the second, the prison was not an adequate healthcare facility. Thóra didn't know how well the prisoners considered to be of sound mind would interact with those suffering from mental illness, and she couldn't imagine how the harsh conditions of prison life could possibly be conducive to the treatment of the criminally insane. All seven places at Sogn were always occupied.

The turn was sharp and her car's wheels skidded on the slippery gravel. Thóra gripped the steering wheel more tightly and concentrated on getting up the short driveway. She didn't want to start her visit by driving off the road and having to be towed up out of the shallow ditch – today was going to be weird enough without that. The woman she'd phoned to put in her request to see the inmate had been quite pleasant, but it was clear from her tone that such enquiries were anything but commonplace. Thóra thought the woman had also sounded nervous, as if she was worried about the purpose of Thóra's visit. Not that that was surprising, given the background of the man she was there to meet. This was no run-of-the-mill inmate, no nervous breakdown, drug addict

or alcoholic. JÓsteinn Karlsson had been firmly on the road to perdition since his youth, despite numerous interventions by the system.

Thóra had acquainted herself with his record after deciding to assist him, and it hadn't made for pleasant reading. She had only had access to two of his cases – the details of the crimes he'd committed as a juvenile were off-limits – and in one of them, from twenty years ago, JÓsteinn had been charged with false imprisonment, actual bodily harm and sexual offences against children. He was alleged to have lured a nearly six-year-old boy into his home from the street, for a purpose that thankfully never became clear because the man in the flat next door called the police. The vigilant neighbour had long distrusted JÓsteinn and insisted that he was responsible for the disappearance of his two cats, after the animals had been found in poor condition directly below JÓsteinn's balcony. But although JÓsteinn had been caught red-handed in his home with a child unknown to him, and in spite of the existence of a character witness without a good word to say about him, JÓsteinn escaped from the affair relatively unscathed. The child couldn't be persuaded to testify, either in court or elsewhere. A psychologist had attempted to speak to him, but to no avail. The child clammed up as soon as the topic was broached. It was the opinion of the psychologist that JÓsteinn had scared the boy into silence by threatening him. This, he said, was a common technique of abusers, to buy the child's silence with threats before violating their innocence, and nobody was easier to frighten than a young child. It was impossible to get the boy to tell him how JÓsteinn had threatened him, or anything about what had occurred before the police arrived, which made it

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impossible to prove beyond doubt that JÓsteinn had abused the child in the apartment. The prosecution's allegation of sexual assault and bodily harm did not get far, since the boy had no injuries. Yet no one in the courtroom could have believed JÓsteinn's claim that he'd thought the child was lost and wanted to help him find his parents. Due to the lack of evidence, JÓsteinn received a suspended sentence of six years for false imprisonment.

Twelve years later JÓsteinn sexually assaulted a teenager, and this time there was no vigilant neighbour. The parents of the little boy who'd escaped relatively unharmed must have offered up heartfelt prayers of thanks when the media began to report the details of what JÓsteinn had done to the second boy. Thóra remembered the case well – though almost a decade had passed – but this was the first time she had read the verdict itself. It seemed clear that JÓsteinn had intended to kill the boy, and only pure chance had prevented him; the woman who cleaned the hallways had come to work a day earlier than usual that week, as her daughter was due to be confirmed the next day. She probably wouldn't have noticed anything if she'd only vacuumed the communal areas as usual, but some kid had spilt his ice cream on the wall right next to JÓsteinn's front door, meaning she stopped there for longer than she usually would. When she turned off the vacuum cleaner she could hear the victim's muffled cries for help, and after a moment's hesitation she decided to phone the police instead of knocking on the door. In her call the woman had told the emergency services operator she'd never heard anything like the sounds coming from the apartment, and she was unable to describe them in detail. All she could say was that it was the sound of terrible suffering. The police

broke into Jósteinn's flat again, and this time he was caught red-handed.

As she read through the ruling Thóra noticed a strange detail that piqued her curiosity. During the investigation, the police had received an anonymous tip telling them exactly where in Jósteinn's flat to find certain photographs; these photos had been taken over a number of years and showed clearly how many children he had abused, and in what ways. The photographs had raised the level of the investigation; had they not been found, the individual offences Jósteinn would have been charged with might have only seen him sentenced to a few years. The discovery of the pictures allowed the police to obtain a search warrant for Jósteinn's workplace, a computer workshop, to which they had not previously had access. An enormous amount of child pornography and other hardcore material was found, which gave the investigators enough evidence to bring the case against him. Shortly thereafter it went to trial and Jósteinn was ordered to undergo psychiatric evaluation, following which he was found guilty but declared not criminally liable due to insanity. This meant he was acquitted of the criminal charges, but sentenced to detention in the Secure Psychiatric Unit at Sogn, where he was to remain until the courts ruled that his treatment was complete and that he no longer posed a threat to those around him.

Thóra could glean little more except that Jósteinn seemed to have fared rather better than his victim, who was still recovering in Reykjavík City Hospital's rehabilitation unit when the sentence was passed. In her peculiar phone call with Jósteinn he'd hinted that he wanted to discuss an old case, but it was unclear whether he meant the first one or

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the second. To reopen either seemed preposterous; he had received a ridiculously light sentence first time round, and the more recent case was so clear-cut that she couldn't see what there was to challenge about the verdict. Was JÓsteinn hoping to overturn the ruling of insanity and have his incarceration transmuted to an ordinary prison sentence, after which he might be able to gain his freedom? From the short conversation they'd had it was impossible to assess his mental condition; he'd sounded completely normal, if a little brusque and arrogant. He was probably just as ill as the day that he'd arrived; the verdict had included a summary of the psychiatrist's diagnosis, stating that JÓsteinn suffered from acute schizophrenia and other personality disorders that could mostly be kept in check with drugs and therapy but that would be almost impossible to cure fully. Thóra had noted that the same psychiatrist suggested the possibility be explored of housing JÓsteinn in a secure psychiatric ward abroad, one better equipped to handle such a severely damaged individual; the doctor thought it unlikely that any Icelandic unit would be able to cope.

Thóra got out of the car and took her briefcase from the back seat. It actually didn't contain anything other than print-outs of the two Supreme Court verdicts, along with a large notebook. Not that she expected to take many notes; she was almost sure she'd turn down the case, conjuring up some imaginary work as an excuse. The details of how JÓsteinn had abused the teenager still haunted her, and she did not intend to hasten this man's release from custody. In fact, she wished she'd just said no from the outset. She shut the car door and walked to the entrance. She was in no position to assess the man's mental health and was unsure what she would

be confronted with: had Jósteinn recovered his sanity? Was he now so overcome with remorse that he wanted a second chance? Or was he incurably evil, desperate to be released and find his next victim?

Thóra rang the bell and looked around while she waited. She watched two men walk slowly towards a little greenhouse and go in, each carrying a bucket. One of the men looked like he had Down's syndrome and was possibly an inmate, while the other appeared to be a staff member. Her attention was directed back to the house when the door opened to reveal a woman in a white coat, which she wore unbuttoned over jeans and a tatty jumper. The coat looked just as well worn as the jumper, and repeated washing had all but erased its National Hospital logo.

The woman introduced herself as the duty nurse. She ushered Thóra in and showed her where to hang her coat, making small talk about the traffic and the weather, then led her further into the house and opened the door to a shabby but cosy sitting room where she said the interview would take place. Large windows looked out on a garden and the little greenhouse, inside which the two men Thóra had seen a couple of minutes ago were now busily tending some impressively lush plants. The nurse volunteered the information that the greenhouse's construction had been funded by a generous donation from an elderly woman who more than sixty years before had lost her two-year-old daughter; a man with severe mental health problems had woken one day with the desire to kill someone, not caring who. He had chosen the little girl, though she was a perfect stranger to him. Her mother's benevolence after all these years showed great strength of character, thought Thóra, though this didn't make her any less nervous about the security



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situation in the sitting room if JÓsteinn should decide to attack her. Ideally, she would have preferred them to sit on opposite sides of bulletproof glass. ‘Am I safe here?’ She looked around at the chairs with their embroidered cushions.

‘I’ll be in the next room.’ The woman looked unruffled. ‘If anything happens just shout and we’ll be right there.’ Realizing Thóra was still unsure, she said: ‘He won’t do anything to you. He’s been here for nearly ten years without hurting anyone.’ After a slight hesitation she added, ‘Well, any human beings, anyway.’

Thóra frowned. ‘What do you mean – has he hurt an animal?’

‘That’s not an issue any more. There are no animals here now, because of how the most acutely ill inmates reacted to them. But of course we are in the countryside, and animals from the nearby farms do sometimes wander into the grounds.’ The nurse didn’t give Thóra the chance to pursue the subject. ‘Please have a seat and I’ll go and get JÓsteinn.’ It seemed that the man hadn’t earned himself a nickname during his detention. ‘I know he’s excited to meet you.’

The woman left, and Thóra pondered where it would be safest to sit. The last thing she wanted was to end up too close to him. A worn armchair positioned slightly off to the side appeared to be the best option, and Thóra went over and placed her briefcase on the coffee table in front of it. She decided to stand there until the man came in, having read a long time ago about the importance of standing when wishing to gain the upper hand. The person sitting was forced to look up at the other, which – so the theory ran – tipped the balance of power.

The nurse brought JÓsteinn in, introduced him and

reminded Thóra that she would be within earshot if they needed her. Thóra saw a grin flicker across Josteinn's face at this, although the nurse had been careful to word it as if she were offering to bring them coffee if they called for it. He clearly realized that Thóra was nervous, so the balance of power was irrelevant. It was no use letting it get to her, so Thóra collected herself and calmly invited him to sit. Refusing to meet her eye, he accepted her invitation with the same sarcastic smile as before, choosing the sofa across from her chair. She followed his example and sat. Josteinn was slim, and although the clothes he wore were not at all fitted, Thóra could tell from his sinewy neck and hands that he was strong. He appeared to have dark hair, but it could have been the gel or wax he'd applied making it look darker than it was. It looked almost as though he'd just been swimming, and in one place the clear substance had run down his cheek, leaving a shiny streak on his bony, rat-like face. He still hadn't looked directly at her.

'Are you comfortable?' he said. Although the question was courteous, his tone was faintly mocking. 'I hardly ever have visitors, so I want your visit to be as pleasant as possible. They wanted to put us in a meeting room, but I thought it was too formal so I asked if we could meet here.' He narrowed his grey eyes at the coffee table between them and pursed his thin lips. 'I hardly ever have visitors,' he repeated, then smiled unconvincingly. 'Never, in fact.'

'It might be easier if you got straight to the point.' Thóra was generally much politer to people she met through work, but Josteinn made her so uneasy that she was going to find it hard to avoid being downright rude to him. 'I've acquainted myself with your case as best I can, but I don't know what

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it is you expect of me. Naturally, I would prefer it if you just told me.'

'*Naturally?*' JÓsteinn looked up at her now. 'What's natural? I've never been able to figure that out.' He sniggered nastily. 'If I had, we wouldn't be sitting here.'

'No, probably not.' Thóra opened her briefcase. 'You've been here at Sogn for eight years or thereabouts. Is that right?'

'Yes. No. I'm not too sure. Numbers and I don't mix. They lay traps for me, then I fall in and can't get out.'

Thóra didn't want to know what he meant. She had all the evidence she needed: he was still ill. Whether he was still dangerous was another matter, although Thóra felt fairly confident that he was. 'Trust me, it's been pretty close to eight years.' She regarded him as he nodded apathetically. 'Do you miss your freedom?'

'I've come to consider myself just as free here as anywhere else.' JÓsteinn waited, perhaps expecting Thóra to contradict him, and continued when she said nothing. 'Freedom is multifaceted, it's not just about locked doors and bars on the windows. The kind of freedom I long for doesn't exist, in my opinion, so I'd never be completely free anywhere. Here is no worse than anywhere else.'

Thóra had no idea how to get the conversation on to a more even footing. 'Do you have anything to occupy you? Do they have recreational activities, arts and crafts, anything like that?' She couldn't envision the man with scissors and glue, unless he were gluing someone's lips shut to stop them screaming as he stabbed them with the scissors.

JÓsteinn laughed woodenly, like a bad actor auditioning for a comedy. The laughter stopped as abruptly as it had begun, and he straightened in his chair. 'There are activities,

yes. One guy embroiders pillows, and as you can see he's been here quite a long time. I work on repairing broken computers that we get for free from the government. The work suits me fine. It's what I did before I came here.' He pointed out of the window. 'And Jakob works in the greenhouse, growing herbs and lettuces.'

Thóra turned and watched the two men come out of the little greenhouse, their buckets appearing much heavier now than when they'd gone in. It was clear now that the chubbier one did have Down's syndrome. 'Very practical.' She very much wanted to ask what Jakob had done; as far as she knew, people with Down's were usually peaceful and good-natured. Of course this went for most people, and it was the exceptions to the rule who ended up here.

'He's my friend. A good friend.' For the first time Jósteynn seemed to be speaking sincerely. It didn't last long. He turned away from the window. 'Is it possible to reopen old cases? To overturn a conviction and get an acquittal, if you're innocent?'

Thóra was prepared for this question, and had in fact been waiting for it. 'Yes, if there is strong enough evidence of wrongful conviction.'

'I've recently become a rich man. Did you know that?'

Thóra shook her head. Was he delusional? 'No, I haven't looked into your finances. Have you made a profit from your computer work?' Perhaps his definition of 'rich' was different to hers.

'I inherited money from my mother. Now everything I am *and* everything I own comes from her.' His features softened into a dopey smile and Thóra recalled reading about his difficult childhood and the genetic nature of his condition.

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He had probably been raised by an unfit mother, a female version of himself.

‘She was hit by a car, you see, and because she was paralysed she got benefits. She died soon after, and now the benefits and everything else she owned are mine. I’m getting rid of all her personal belongings but the money, I’m keeping.’

‘Do you have a trustee?’ asked Thóra. She was pretty sure he wouldn’t be allowed control over his own finances.

‘No. But I do have a supervisor. He’s never been to see me; I’ve not even had a phone call.’ Jósteinn spoke dispassionately, as if unaware of the significance of this. ‘I want to use the money to reopen an old case. I don’t have much use for it otherwise. Luckily, too much time has passed since I was convicted for the boy I messed with to sue me for damages. Or rather, for his relatives to sue me – I heard he lost his marbles.’ Jósteinn grinned, seeming to find the idea amusing.

There was a sudden knock on the window. Thóra couldn’t conceal her shock, and Jósteinn looked delighted. ‘It’s just Jakob, wanting to know who’s come to see me. As I told you, I’ve never had a visitor.’ He smiled again. ‘Which is understandable, of course.’

Thóra stared back at the beaming face with thick-lensed glasses pressed up against the window. Jakob ran his muddy hands down the pane, leaving brown smears, before waving enthusiastically at Thóra. She waved back. ‘Why is he in here?’ The question slipped out before she had a chance to stop it.

Jósteinn did not seem rattled. ‘He killed five people in an arson attack, just like that. It was amazing.’

‘Yes, an extraordinary case.’ Thóra remembered it, as it wasn’t an everyday occurrence for people to burn to death in

Iceland. It had been overshadowed by the financial crash, which had happened at the same time. ‘Was it about eighteen months ago?’

‘I think so.’ Jósteinn flapped his hand dismissively, as if the timing of the fire were an irrelevance. ‘He’s only about twenty, and he’ll probably spend most of the rest of his life in here. People like him often have weak hearts, so he might die before he ever gets out.’

They seemed to be getting off-course again. Thóra said, ‘I think I ought to tell you that I don’t believe there’s much to warrant reopening your case. You were caught red-handed, so to speak, and I can’t see how you could come up with a new explanation for what happened without very compelling new evidence. The verdict looks bulletproof, and I can’t see that there was anything untoward in how the case was tried.’

Jósteinn laughed again, louder this time. An unpleasant waft of halitosis drifted over to Thóra and she screwed up her face involuntarily, as she did whenever a change in the wind gave her an unwelcome update on the state of decay of her neighbours’ compost heap. His hilarity was short-lived, and Jósteinn let his expression go blank once more. ‘Not *my* case! Jakob’s. The fire.’ He ran his hand through his greasy hair and then wiped it on the arm of the sofa. ‘He didn’t do it. I know more than you can ever imagine about what it takes to do bad things. Jakob didn’t set light to anyone or anything, and I want you to prove it.’ He suddenly leaned forward and grabbed Thóra’s hand, which had been resting on the coffee table, with both of his. His eyes met hers for a brief moment, but then moved back down to their joined hands. She could feel the sticky hair gel, like thick sweat, on his palms. ‘Sometimes a child who’s had his fingers burned still wants to play with fire . . .’