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# **Blackout**

Written by Ragnar Jónasson

Translated by Quentin Bates

Published by Orenda Books

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RAGNAR JÓNASSON

translated by Quentin Bates



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*The author would like to thank the people of the north of Iceland and Siglufjörður  
in particular, as well as those of Landeyjar, for the use of those places as the settings  
for this book. It should, however, be made clear that this is a work of imagination  
with none of the characters portrayed here having any basis in reality.*

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For my mother and father

## Author's note

Special thanks are due to Detective Eiríkur Rafn Rafnsson, Prosecutor Hulda María Stefánsdóttir, Dr Helgi Ellert Jóhannsson and Dr Jón Gunnlaugur Jónasson. Any mistakes in the final version of this book are the author's responsibility.

The extract from the poem by Jón Guðmundsson the Learned is taken from *Fjölmóður – eivdrápa Jóns lærða Guðmundssonar*, with an introduction and notes by Páll Eggert Ólason.

Information about the historic effect in Siglufjörður of volcanic eruptions in Iceland are taken from the book *Siglfirskur annáll*, written by my grandfather, Þ. Ragnar Jónasson, and published in 1998.

One must allow the  
black of night to elapse,  
with the passing of the ages  
once lots are drawn,  
endure in silence  
hardship's burden,  
this is God's gift to  
which he bears witness.

Jón Guðmundsson the Learned (1574–1658)

From his poem *Fjölmóður*.



Arctic Circle

Skagafjörður

• Siglufjörður

Grettislaug  
• Sauðárkrúkur

• Akureyri

Reykjavík

Hekla

Eyjafjalla-  
jökull  
Katla

Lánfeyjar

The events of *Blackout* take place in June 2010, following the events of *Snowblind*, the first book in the Dark Iceland series.



**PART I: DAY 1**  
**SUMMER**

*How do you like Iceland?*

If for nothing else, he had come to Iceland to avoid that kind of question.

The day began well, as the fine June morning dawned. Not that there was any clear difference between morning and evening at this time of year, when the sun stayed bright around the clock, casting blinding light wherever he looked.

Evan Fein had long anticipated visiting this island at the edge of the habitable world. And now here this Ohio art history student was, on his first visit to Iceland. Nature had pooled its energies, as if to add to the woes of the financial crash by presenting Icelanders with two volcanic eruptions, one right after the other. The volcanic activity appeared to have subsided for the moment though, and Evan had just missed the events.

He had already spent a few days in Iceland, starting by taking in the sights of Reykjavík and the tourist spots around the city. Then he hired a car and set off for the north. After a night at a campsite at Blönduós, he had made an early start, setting out for Skagafjörður. He had purchased a CD of old-fashioned Icelandic ballads and now slotted it into the car's player, enjoying the music without understanding a word of the lyrics, proud to be something of a travel nerd, immersing himself in the culture of the countries he visited.

He took the winding Thverárfjall road, turning off before he got as far as the town of Saudarkrókur on the far side of the peninsula. He wanted to take a look at Grettir's Pool, the ancient stone-flagged hot bath that he knew had to be somewhere nearby, not far from the shore.

It was a slow drive along the rutted track to the pool, and he wondered if trying to find it was a waste of time. But the thought of relaxing for a while in the steaming water and taking in both the beauty of his surroundings and the tranquillity of the morning was a tempting one. He drove at a snail's pace, lambs scattering from the sides of the road as he passed, but the pool stubbornly refused to be found. Evan started to wonder if he had missed the turning, and slowed down at every farm gate, trying to work out if the entrance to the pool might be hidden away – across a farmer's land, or down a side turning, a country lane. Had he driven too far?

Finally he saw a handsome house, which, on closer inspection, looked to be half built. It stood not far from the road with a small grey van parked in front of it. Evan pulled his car to the side of the road and stopped. And then started with surprise.

The van driver, the house's owner, perhaps, was lying on the ground near the house. Unmoving. Unconscious? Evan unbuckled his seatbelt and opened his door without even turning off the engine. The age-old ballads continued to crackle from the car's tinny speakers, making the scene seem almost surreal.

Evan started to run, but then slowed as the whole scene came into view.

The man was dead. There was no doubt about that. It had to be a man lying there, judging by the build and the cropped hair. There was no chance of identifying the face, though. It was erased by a spatter of blood.

Where there had once been an eye, there was now an empty socket.

Evan gasped for air and stared numbly at the corpse in front of him, fumbling for his phone, the incongruous sound of his Icelandic ballads in the background.

He turned quickly, checking that the man's assailant wasn't behind him.

*Nothing.* Apart from the dead man, Evan was alone.

Next to the body was a length of timber, smeared with blood. The weapon?

Evan retched as he tried to stifle the thoughts that flooded his mind.

*Think. Be calm.*

He sat down in the pasture in front of the house, and punched out the emergency number on his phone, wishing fervently that he had picked another destination for his holiday.

*Iceland is one of the safest places on earth,* the travel guide had said.

Evan's eyes darted around, taking in the warm summer sun casting her glow across the verdant fields, the stunning mountains hovering in the distance, the glint of her rays on the bright-blue waters of the outlying fjord and its magnificent islands.

*Not anymore,* he thought, as the operator was connected.

*Not anymore.*

The buzzing of a fly that had strayed through the open bedroom window woke Ísrún, prompting her to check the time and then curse when she realised how early it still was. She yawned and stretched her arms. A little more sleep wouldn't have done any harm, and her shift on the news desk wasn't until nine-thirty. She lifted herself on her elbows and gazed out the window at the tall trees in the communal garden outside and the block of flats on the opposite site of the road. It looked like an uneventful day ahead. The eruption had subsided for the moment, and now that summer was here, the city was quiet. And so was work. She'd been to a summer festival with a cameraman the day before, and her only task was to put together some lightweight filler material to bring the evening news bulletin to a close on a light-hearted note. Chances were that they wouldn't run it anyway, as something meatier usually came long to take the place of the frothier material.

She'd been with the same news team for ten years now, albeit with a few breaks, joining straight from college on a freelance basis, and continuing throughout her psychology degree. Although she'd made a respectable attempt to work in the health sector, she found herself missing the newsroom buzz, and had dipped in and out over the years – while completing her master's degree in Denmark, and even after taking up a hospital post in Akureyri for a while. But eighteen months ago, Ísrún had resigned from the hospital and returned to Reykjavík, searching out her old job in the newsroom.

Many of her old colleagues had moved on, replaced by new faces, but some of the stalwarts were still there. When she had first applied

for the TV newsroom all those years ago, she had not seriously expected to get the job. She had thought that the scar on her face would undoubtedly preclude on-screen work, but she flew through the selection process and it hadn't turned out to be a hindrance to her career. She stroked her cheek now, her scar as familiar to her as any other feature, the legacy of a childhood accident – an elderly relative had spilled hot coffee over her when she was just a few months old. One cheek was permanently disfigured, and although she had learned to apply makeup to make it less obvious, it couldn't be ignored. But perhaps her scar was the reason why she had been so determined to apply for a TV job; it was an opportunity to show the world – or at least audiences in Iceland – that she wasn't going to let it stop her.

Ísrún sat up in bed and looked around the airy, understated room with satisfaction. Living alone suited her. She'd been single for the last two years – the longest time she'd been without a significant relationship. Relocating to Denmark to study for a few years had ended things with her last boyfriend. They'd been together for five years, but it hadn't been enough to make him want to join her there – or, indeed, wait for her to come home. *Oh well*, she had thought. *That's his problem.*

To her surprise, television work turned out to be more rewarding than psychology, but what she had learned certainly helped with her work as a journalist. Her job gave her the opportunity to see something different every day – talk to interesting characters and hope that a decent scoop would come her way. Those were the best days. A little pressure could become addictive, but she didn't enjoy the stress of the constant deadlines. Shifts were frequently short-staffed and it was often a struggle to deliver by the end of the day. Spending time on a story was a rare luxury, as was researching things in any depth.

Ísrún closed her eyes again, willing herself to fall back into slumber. The fly continued to buzz somewhere in the room, and her eyes snapped open with frustration.

Out of bed and on the street in her running gear just a few minutes later, determined to make the most of her unexpectedly

early start, Ísrún took a deep breath of the morning air, missing its usual freshness. It tasted sour, tainted with the volcanic residue from the eruption in Eyjafjallajökull glacier, in the southern part of Iceland, which had spewed ash earlier in the spring, interrupting air traffic across half the world. No wonder the fly had sought shelter indoors. During and after the volcanic eruption, ash had frequently been carried over the city, even though the volcano was quite a distance away. It affected everyone, irritating eyes and hampering breathing. On the worst days it was recommended that people suffering from asthma and similar conditions should stay indoors. The eruption had now ended, with only this residual ash remaining, but there was some fear that this seismic activity could trigger an eruption of another ferocious volcano, Katla, with far more devastating consequences.

Ísrún lived in a small two-room apartment, in a block near the University of Iceland, and she made a habit of running along the seashore whenever she had the opportunity, preferably in the mornings before changing into her work clothes and leaving for the TV station's offices. She was determined not to let the volcanic pollution stop her. During her run she thought ahead to what would be undoubtedly be another routine day awaiting her.

Her old red banger, a car that had been in the family for years and was given to her by her father when she was twenty, still got her to work on time. Strictly speaking, the car was practically an antique, but it served its purpose. The traffic was quiet today – one of the advantages of the news-desk job was the nine-thirty start, well after the morning rush hour had tailed off. Less popular were the frequent late shifts that took her past the evening bulletin and into an inevitable meeting afterwards. Working on the later bulletin was often a better option, however; she lost an evening, but gained the following morning off in lieu, and that time could be precious.

*Hell!* She had forgotten that Ívar was running the shifts today and tomorrow. There was a tension between them that was bordering on hostility. He had been appointed two years before, while she was still

trying to forge a career in psychology. He considered himself some kind of big shot, having been poached from a competing station, and despite the fact that she'd more than proved herself over the past eighteen months, he still looked on her as a beginner. He didn't seem capable of trusting her with anything serious, and she knew she didn't have what it would take to hammer the table with her fist and fight her corner. Maybe she would have done a few years ago, but that time had passed.



She took a seat in the meeting room. Ívar sat at the end with his notebook, from which he was never far away, and a sheaf of papers – press releases that would find their way to one of the journalists or to the bin.

‘Ísrún, did you come up with any material from the summer festival?’

Did she detect a note of condescension there? Did the easy stuff always come her way? Or was she just being unnecessarily suspicious?

‘Not yet. I’ll have it done today and it’ll be ready for this evening. Two minutes?’

‘Ninety seconds, tops.’

Her colleagues had slowly gathered at the table and the morning news meeting had formally begun.

‘Did anyone notice the air pollution this morning?’ Kormákur asked, leaning back in his chair and gnawing at his pencil. He was known as Kommi, mainly because everyone was aware how much he disliked the nickname.

‘Yeah. It’s ash from the eruption blowing this way, stuff that built up during the eruption itself, or so I’m told,’ Ívar said.

‘I thought the eruption was all over,’ Kormákur said, and then grinned. ‘We can probably squeeze one more story out of it.’

‘Ísrún, can you check it out? Do something with a bit of menace



to it, maybe. The eruption returns to Reykjavík – that sort of thing?’ Ívar smiled.

*Condescending fool*, she thought, glaring at her notebook.

‘But let’s have a look at the serious stuff,’ he said.

*Exactly*, Ísrún thought, raising her eyebrows with irritation.

‘I hear someone found a body up north, not far from Sau-dárkrókur, next to a building site. Nothing’s confirmed yet. That’s definitely our lead, unless there’s another eruption.’

Kormákur nodded. ‘I’ll get onto it right away.’

It didn’t look like it was going to be a slow news day after all ... for some.

It was still a surprise to Ari Thór Arason that he had stayed with the Siglufjörður police as long as he had. Almost two years had passed since he had moved north after graduating from police college, having already abandoned a theology degree.

That first winter in the north had been hell and the weight of snow had been relentless and suffocating. But when the warm, bright days emerged from the frozen darkness, his spirits had lifted and he saw his new home with fresh eyes. And he now had a second winter behind him. Although he still found the isolation of the winter darkness oppressive, he was getting used to it, even enjoying the sight of a fresh fall of snow on the colourful buildings that hugged the coast, and the icy grandeur of the mountains that enveloped the village. Yet it was a relief when the sun finally showed up after its winter sojourn behind the mountains. As they edged their way into June, there had already been a few warm days – a little later than down south, but that was only to be expected. Even the sun appeared to forget the northernmost village in Iceland from time to time.

Tómas, Siglufjörður's police inspector, had called that morning and asked Ari Thór to come in earlier than scheduled. Although his shift didn't start until midday, he was on his way to the station by nine. Tómas hadn't said much on the phone, but Ari Thór had been sure he could hear real concern in his voice. The truth was that Tómas was never particularly cheerful these days. It had been a blow when his wife decided to Reykjavík to study. Nobody, except maybe Tómas, seriously expected that she would ever come back to Siglufjörður. They were still together, on paper, at least, which

was more than could be said for Ari Thór and his former girlfriend Kristín.

Their relationship had unquestionably fizzled out, although Ari Thór harboured hopes that he'd be able to breathe new life into it again. Four years had passed since they had first met, back when he had been studying theology and Kristín was still a medical student. There had been an instant attraction and she had managed to coax him out of his shell – a damaged young man who had lost both parents at a young age and been raised by his grandmother in a way that had made him self-reliant, even as a youngster, capable of fending for himself and reluctant to let anyone come too close.

Kristín had brought him a longed-for warmth and security, but things had started to come apart as soon as the new job had taken him to Siglufjörður. Kristín had been deeply upset by his decision and remained in Reykjavík, not even taking the time to come and stay with him over Christmas. He had been just as hurt by her reaction, and their relationship became increasingly distant, frosty. And then he took a wrong turn. The piano teacher in Siglufjörður, a young woman from the Westfjords, Uglá, had captivated him in much the same way that Kristín once had, providing him with a cosy escape from the chilly isolation of Siglufjörður. What began with a kiss had ended in her bedroom, and there was no way that he would ever be able to convince Kristín that he hadn't been unfaithful to her. The snow and the winter darkness had created a mirage; the isolation crushing his conscience and convincing him that he was in love. However, as spring dawned over the Siglufjörður mountains, he knew with unswerving certainty that Kristín was the only one for him.

But it was far too late. Rashly, he had called Kristín to let her know that he had begun seeing someone in Siglufjörður and to end their relationship, and there hadn't been much more to their conversation than that. He had heard a crash, and assumed that she had hurled her phone against the nearest wall. It wasn't until later that he found out she had given up a temporary appointment for the summer and an

opportunity to finish her medical studies at a hospital in Reykjavík so that she could move north to Akureyri to be close to him.

*How could he have been so stupid?*

Of course, once he finally admitted that he'd had a girlfriend in Reykjavík all along, the relationship with Uglá didn't go any further either. If she had been holding a phone, it would have gone the same way as Kristín's, but hurled at him instead. The piano lessons stopped there and then.

He missed Kristín. After they had parted he had tried to call her several times, but without success, and there were no replies to his emails. Some months had now passed since his last attempt to contact her. He knew she had moved to Akureyri to finish the final year of her medical studies, and had heard from mutual friends that she had taken a job at the hospital there. It was painful to know she was so close, when another kind of distance yawned between them. He had immersed himself in work after that, pushing himself harder than he had ever done before. There was little else for him to do.

Ari Thór intended to buy himself something healthy for breakfast on his way to the station. A small cruise liner had docked that morning and the town hummed with activity, tourists snapping photos among the groups of local youngsters who were busy with rakes and other tools, doing summer work for the town council. The aroma of cinnamon and chocolate from the bakery was a temptation, but that hardly constituted a healthy breakfast. He paused for a moment as the scent washed over him. The quality of Sígulfjörður's cinnamon buns, known as *hnútar*, left the Reykjavík version he was used to in the shade. A peek through the window, though, showed that a crowd of tourists had the same thoughts on their minds, so something from the bakery would have to wait until later. Instead, he stopped off at the little fish shop on the Town Hall Square and asked for some dried fish. It wasn't his usual breakfast, but it was certainly a healthy option.

'Catfish, as usual?' the fishmonger asked.

'Yes, please.'

‘There you go, Reverend.’

Ari Thór scowled to himself, paid for his bag of dried catfish chunks and said a curt goodbye as he left. The ‘Reverend’ nickname continued to surface occasionally, having appeared when people had found out about his curtailed theological studies. He still hadn’t got used to it, and sometimes the taunts stung.

Tómas immediately sniffed the air when Ari Thór sat at the table in the station’s coffee corner and unwrapped his unusual breakfast.

‘Not that stuff again, Ari Thór! And now for breakfast? Don’t you ever get tired of it?’

‘I thought I was the city boy here who shouldn’t be eating this old-fashioned stuff,’ Ari Thór answered, continuing to pick his way through his fish.

‘Jokes aside, Ari Thór, there’s something we need to deal with. Hlynur’s on his way and he can take today’s shift,’ Tómas said.

Tómas had changed after his wife had moved south, he seemed to have aged ten years. His zest for life had faded, and although there hadn’t been much there before, the hair on his head looked even thinner.

There was no doubt that Tómas was a lonely man. Ari Thór knew that his youngest son had also left home and now lived in the student hall of residence at the college in Akureyri during term time. He had found himself summer work with the local authority there and had rented a place to live with two of his classmates. He visited his father occasionally at weekends, but that was it, so Tómas was pretty much alone in the house in Siglufjörður.

‘A body’s been found,’ Tómas announced, when Ari Thór had taken a seat.

‘A body?’

‘That’s right. In Skagafjörður, on Reykjaströnd, next to a summer house that’s being built there, not far from Grettir’s Pool.’

‘Is this any business of Siglufjörður’s?’ Ari Thór asked, and immediately regretted the abrupt question. He was tired after staying up long into the night, having expected to be able to sleep in that morning. He rubbed his eyes.

‘Some tourist from America found the body. He drove past it on his way to the pool,’ Tómas continued, ignoring Ari Thór’s interruption. ‘It looks nasty. They’ve sent me some pictures of the scene.’

‘A murder?’

‘No doubt about that, Ari Thór, and a brutal one, too. The victim’s practically unrecognisable. He was smashed in the face with a length of timber. It seems there was a nail in it that went right through one eye. The reason we’ve been asked to help with the investigation is because the victim had his “legal residence” here.’ Tómas’s tone indicated that the man hadn’t been born in Siglufjörður.

‘An out-of-towner?’

‘Exactly. Elías Freysson. I don’t remember ever meeting the man. He was a contractor working on the new tunnel. I said we’d find out what we can about him here, and I want you to manage that.’ His voice was decisive, firm. ‘Of course I’ll work on it with you, but it’s time you took on more responsibility, Ari Thór.’

Ari Thór nodded his agreement. He liked the idea. His weariness fell away and he was instantly more alert. It occurred to him, and not for the first time, that Tómas was looking at the possibility of moving south to be with his wife, and wanted to leave the Siglufjörður station in safe hands.

‘You said Hlynur would be taking the shift today. So he won’t be involved in this investigation?’

‘That’s right, my boy,’ Tómas said.

Ari Thór breathed easier and hoped that his satisfaction at Tómas’s answer wasn’t too obvious. He couldn’t work with Hlynur. They didn’t get on, on top of which, for some unknown reason, Hlynur had been almost useless for the last few months. He always arrived at work tired, often still half asleep and was increasingly absent-minded.

‘All right. I’ll get on with it right away,’ Ari Thór said. ‘Who was Elías’s boss at the new tunnel?’

‘I know that Hákon is the foreman there, Hákon Halldórsson,’ Tómas said. ‘He’s a Siglufjörður boy,’ he added, and Ari Thór understood from his voice that this was a key item of information.