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Burial Rites

Written by Hannah Kent

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Burial Rites

Hannah Kent

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Quotations from *The Icelandic Burial Hymn* and *The Way of the Cross* sourced
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The hymns were originally written by Hallgrímur Petursson.

Quotations from the *Laxdæla Saga* sourced from the translation by Magnús Magnússon,
first published in 1969 by Penguin Classics, London, and reproduced with the kind permission
of the publisher. The original author of the saga is unknown – it was written in 1245.

The line from the *Laxdæla Saga*, 'I was worst to the one I loved best', translated by the author.

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For my parents

A NOTE ON ICELANDIC NAMES

Icelanders have traditionally used a patronymic naming system, whereby a child's last name is derived from his or her father's first name, together with an affixation of *-són* or *-dóttir*. *Agnes Magnúsdóttir* is therefore literally translated as *Agnes Magnús's daughter*. Because of this system, blood members of an Icelandic family may all have different surnames.

A NOTE ON ICELANDIC PRONUNCIATION

For ease of pronunciation, not all Icelandic letters have been used in this printing. The consonants *ð* (Ð) and *þ* (Þ) have been replaced with 'd' and 'th' respectively.

The pronunciation of certain vowels are conditioned by accents:

á as the *ow* in *owl*

é as the *ye* in *yet*

í as the *ee* in *been*

ó as the *o* in *note*

ö as in the French *fleur*

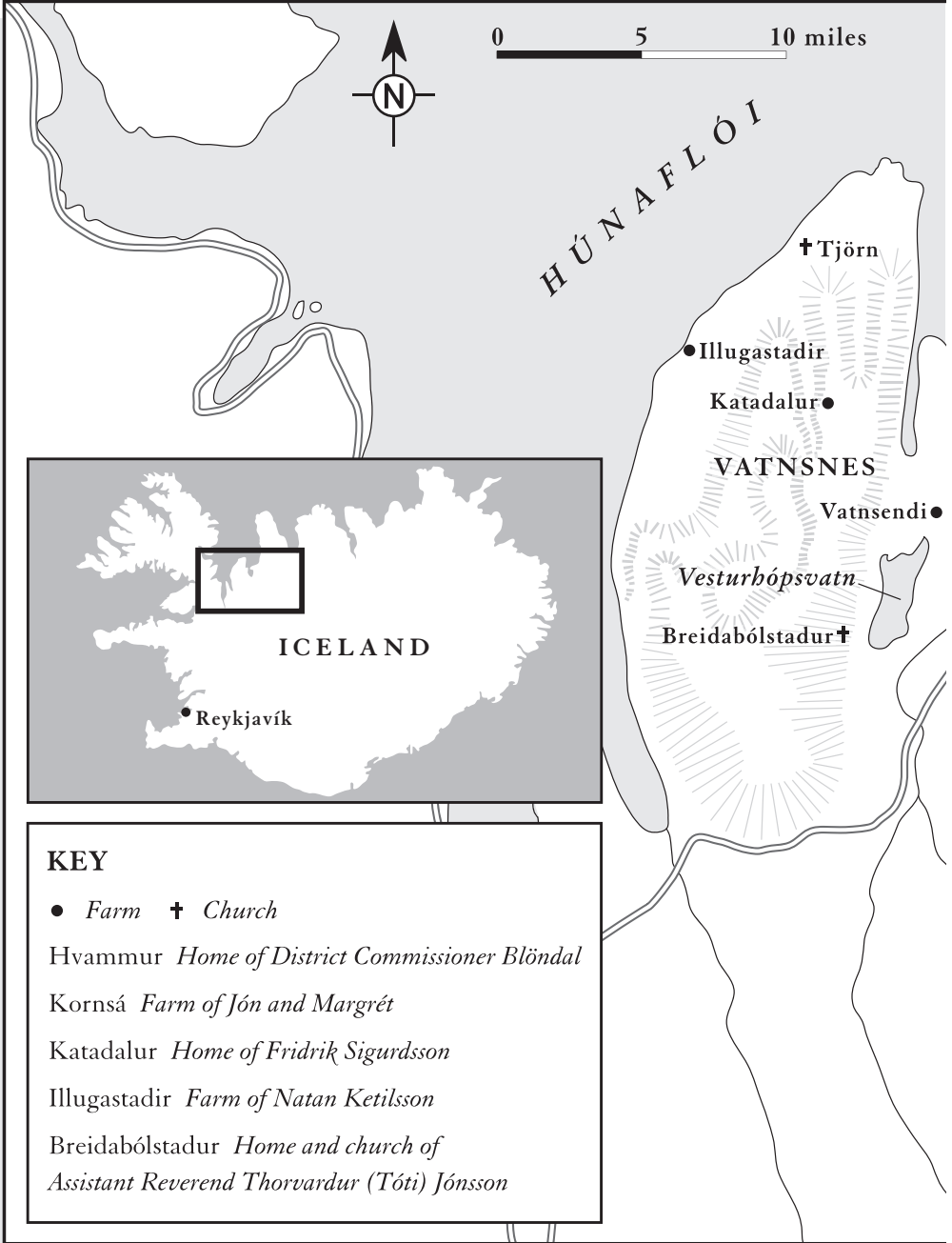
ú as the *oo* in *moon*

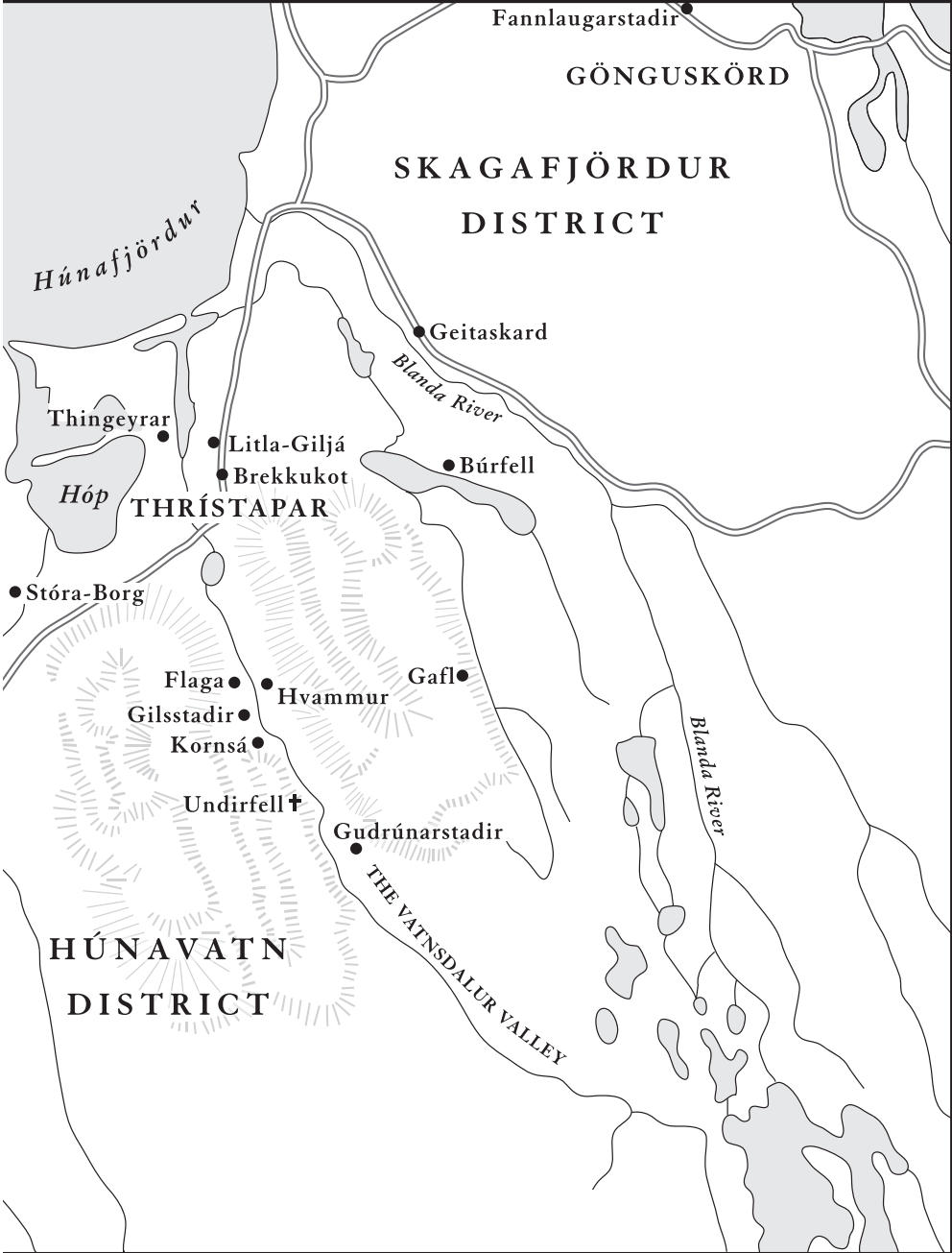
ý as the *ee* in *been*

æ as the *i* in *wife*

au as in the French *oeil*

ei as the *ay* in *way*





‘I WAS WORST TO THE ONE I LOVED BEST.’

Laxdæla Saga

PROLOGUE

THEY SAID I MUST DIE. They said that I stole the breath from men, and now they must steal mine. I imagine, then, that we are all candle flames, greasy-bright, fluttering in the darkness and the howl of the wind, and in the stillness of the room I hear footsteps, awful coming footsteps, coming to blow me out and send my life up away from me in a grey wreath of smoke. I will vanish into the air and the night. They will blow us all out, one by one, until it is only their own light by which they see themselves. Where will I be then?

Sometimes I think I see it again, the farm, burning in the dark. Sometimes I can feel the ache of winter in my lungs, and I think I see the flames mirrored in the ocean, the water so strange, so flickered with light. There was a moment during that night when I looked back. I looked back to watch the fire, and if I lick my skin I can still taste the salt. The smoke.

It wasn't always so cold.

I hear footsteps.

CHAPTER ONE

Public Notice

THERE WILL BE AN AUCTION on the 24th of March 1828, at Illugastadir, for the valuables the farmer Natan Ketilsson has left behind. There is one cow, a few horses, a considerable amount of sheep, hay and furniture, a saddle, a bridle, and many dishes and plates. All this will be sold if a decent offer is presented. All valuables will be awarded to the highest bidder. If the auction is not possible due to bad weather, it will be cancelled and held the next day, weather allowing.

DISTRICT COMMISSIONER
Björn Blöndal

20th of March 1828

To the Very Reverend Jóhann Tómasson,

Thank you for your worthy letter from the 14th, where you wished to be informed of how we attended to the burial of Pétur Jónsson from Geitaskard, who is said to have been murdered and burned on the night between the 13th and the 14th of this month, with Natan Ketilsson. As my Reverend is aware, there was some deliberation over whether his bones should be buried in consecrated ground. His conviction and punishment for robbery, theft, and receiving stolen property was to follow after his prosecution in the Supreme Court. However, we have not had any letters from Denmark. The Land Court judge convicted Pétur on the 5th of February last year, and sentenced him to four years of hard labour in the Rasphus in Copenhagen, but at the time of his murder he was on 'free foot'. Therefore, in answer to your enquiry, his bones were buried with Christian rites, alongside Natan's, as he could not yet be thought of as belonging to those outside the Christian way. These people are expressly defined in the letter from His Majesty the King on the 30th of December 1740, which lists all persons who shall not be permitted Christian burial rites.

DISTRICT COMMISSIONER

Björn Blöndal

30th of May 1829

*Rev. T. Jónsson
Breidabólstaður, Vesturhóp*

To the Assistant Reverend Thorvardur Jónsson,

I trust this letter finds you well and thriving in your administration of the Lord's work in Vesturhóp.

Firstly, I wish to extend to you my congratulations, however belatedly, for the successful completion of your studies in the south of Iceland. Your parishioners say that you are a diligent young man, and I approve of your decision to repair to the north to begin your chaplaincy under the supervision of your father. It is of considerable joy to me to know that there remain righteous men willing to fulfil their duties to man and God.

Secondly, I, in my capacity as District Commissioner, write to you in request of service. As you will be aware, our community has recently been darkened by the shadow of crime. The Illugastadir murders, committed last year, have in their heinousness emblematised the corruption and ungodliness of this county. As District Commissioner for Húnavatn, I cannot abide societal waywardness and, after the anticipated authorisation from the Supreme Court in Copenhagen, I intend to execute the Illugastadir murderers. It is with this event in mind that I ask for your assistance, Assistant Reverend Thorvardur.

As you will recall, I related the event of the murders in a letter circulated to the clergy almost ten months ago, with orders that sermons of chastisement be delivered. Allow me to repeat what occurred, this time to provide you with a more invested consideration of the crime.

Last year, on the night between the 13th and 14th of March, three people committed a severe and loathsome act against two men, with whom you may be familiar: Natan Ketilsson and Pétur Jónsson. Pétur and Natan were found in the burnt ruins of Natan's farm, Illugastadir, and a closer examination of their corpses revealed wounds of a deliberately inflicted nature. This discovery led to an enquiry, and from there a trial ensued. On the 2nd of July last year the three persons charged with these murders – one man and two women – were found guilty in the District Court, presided over by myself, and sentenced to be beheaded: 'He that Smiteth a Man so that he Die, shall be surely put to Death.' The death sentences were upheld in the Land Court on the 27th of October last year, which met in Reykjavík. The case is currently being tried in Copenhagen's Supreme Court, and it is likely that my original judgment will stand there also. The name of the convicted man is Fridrik Sigurdsson, the son of the farmer at Katadalur. The women are workmaids, named Sigríður Gudmundsdóttir and Agnes Magnúsdóttir.

These convicted persons are currently held in custody here in the north, and will be until the time of their execution. Fridrik Sigurdsson has been taken into Thingeyrar by Reverend Jóhann Tómasson, and Sigríður Gudmundsdóttir was removed to Midhóp. Agnes Magnúsdóttir was to be kept until her execution at Stóra-Borg, but for reasons which I am not at liberty to state, will be moved to a new holding at Kornsó in the valley of Vatnsdalur next month. She is discontented with her current

spiritual administrator, and has used one of her few remaining rights to request another priest. She has requested you, Assistant Reverend Thorvardur.

It is with some uncertainty that I approach you for this task. I am aware that your responsibilities have so far been confined to the spiritual education of your parish's youngest members, which is to say, of undoubted value, but it is of little political import. You may yourself admit that you are too pale in experience to know how to bring this condemned woman to the Lord and His infinite mercy, in which case I would not protest your disinclination. It is a weight that I would hesitate to bestow on the shoulders of experienced clergymen.

Should you, however, accept the responsibility of preparing Agnes Magnúsdóttir for her meeting with our Lord, you will be obliged to visit Kornsá regularly when the weather allows. You must administer God's word and inspire repentance and an acknowledgement of Justice. Please do not let flattery influence your decision, nor kinship, if any resides between you and the convicted. In all things, Reverend, if you cannot construct your own counsel, seek mine.

I await word of your response. Please provide my messenger with such.

DISTRICT COMMISSIONER

Björn Blöndal

ASSISTANT REVEREND THORVARDUR JÓNSSON WAS inside the small farmstead adjoined to the church of Breidabólstadur, repairing the hearth with new stones, when he heard his father clear his throat in the doorway.

‘There’s a messenger from Hvammur outside, Tóti. He’s asking for you.’

‘For me?’ In his surprise he let a rock slip out of his hand. It dropped to the packed earth floor, narrowly missing his foot. Reverend Jón sucked his teeth in annoyance, ducked his head under the doorframe and gently pushed Tóti out of the way.

‘Yes, for you. He’s waiting.’

The messenger was a servant, dressed in a worn coat. He gave Tóti a long look before speaking. ‘Reverend Thorvardur Jónsson?’

‘That’s me. Greetings. Well, I’m an Assistant Reverend.’

The servant shrugged. ‘I have a letter for you from the District Commissioner, the Honourable Björn Blöndal.’ He pulled a small slip of paper out from the inside of his coat, and gave it to Tóti. ‘I’ve orders to wait here while you read it.’

The letter was warm and damp from sitting inside the servant’s clothes. Tóti broke the seal and, noting that it had been written that same day, sat on the chopping block outside the doorway and began to read.

When he finished Blöndal's letter, he looked up and noticed the servant watching him. 'Well?' the servant prompted, with a raised eyebrow.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Your response for the District Commissioner? I don't have all day.'

'May I talk with my father?'

The servant sighed. 'Go on then.'

He found his father in the badstofa, slowly smoothing the blankets upon his bed.

'Yes?'

'It's from the District Commissioner.' Tóti offered his father the unfolded letter and waited as he read it, unsure of what to do.

His father's face was impassive as he folded the letter and handed it back. He didn't say anything.

'What should I say?' Tóti asked, finally.

'That's your choice.'

'I don't know her.'

'No.'

'She's not in our parish?'

'No.'

'Why has she asked for me? I'm only an Assistant Reverend.'

His father turned back to his bed. 'Perhaps you ought to address that question to her.'

The servant was sitting on the chopping block, cleaning his nails with a knife. 'Well now. What response am I to give the District Commissioner from the *Assistant* Reverend?'

Tóti replied before he knew his decision. 'Tell Blöndal that I will meet with Agnes Magnúsdóttir.'

The servant's eyes widened. 'Is *that* what this is all about then?'

'I'm to be her spiritual advisor.'

The servant gaped at him, and then suddenly laughed. ‘Good Lord,’ he muttered. ‘They pick a mouse to tame a cat.’ And with that he mounted his horse and vanished behind the swell of hills, leaving Tóti standing still, holding the letter away from him as though it were about to catch fire.



STEINA JÓNSDÓTTIR WAS PILING DRIED dung in the yard outside her family’s turf croft when she heard the rapid cllop of horses’ hooves. Rubbing mud off her skirts, she stood and peered around the side of the hovel to better see the riding track that ran through the valley. A man in a bright red coat was approaching. She watched him turn towards the farm and, fighting a flicker of panic at the realisation she would have to greet him, retreated back around the croft, where she hurriedly spat on her hands to clean them and wiped her nose on her sleeve. When she returned to the yard, the rider was waiting.

‘Hello, young lady.’ The man looked down at Steina and her filthy skirts with an air of bemusement. ‘I see I have interrupted you at your chores.’ Steina stared as he dismounted, gracefully swinging his leg over his horse. For a large man he landed lightly on his feet. ‘Do you know who I am?’ He looked at her for a glimmer of recognition.

Steina shook her head.

‘I am the District Commissioner, Björn Audunsson Blöndal.’ He gave her a little nod of his head and adjusted his coat, which, Steina noticed, was trimmed with silver buttons.

‘You’re from Hvammur,’ she murmured.

Blöndal smiled patiently. ‘Yes. I am your father’s overseer. I have come to speak with him.’

‘He’s not home.’

Blöndal frowned. ‘And your mother?’

‘They’re visiting folks down south in the valley.’

‘I see.’ He looked fixedly at the young woman, who squirmed and cast her eyes nervously to the fields. A smattering of freckles across her nose and forehead interrupted what was otherwise pale skin. Her eyes were brown and widely set, and there was a large gap between her front teeth. There was something rather ungainly about her, Blöndal decided. He noted the thick crescents of dirt under her fingernails.

‘You’ll have to come back later,’ Steina finally suggested.

Blöndal tensed. ‘May I at least come inside?’

‘Oh. If you want. You can tie your horse there.’ Steina bit her lip while Blöndal wound his reins through a post in the yard, and then she turned and almost ran inside.

Blöndal followed her, stooping under the low entrance to the croft. ‘Will your father return this day?’

‘No,’ was the curt reply.

‘How unfavourable,’ Blöndal complained, stumbling in the dark passageway as Steina led him through to the badstofa. He had grown corpulent since his posting as District Commissioner and was accustomed to the more spacious dwelling provided for him and his family at Hvammur, built from imported wood. The hovels of the peasants and farmers had begun to repel him, with their cramped rooms constructed of turf that issued clouds of dust in the summer, irritating his lungs.

‘Commissioner –’

‘District Commissioner.’

‘I’m sorry, District Commissioner. Mamma and Pabbi, I mean, Margrét and Jón, will return tomorrow. Or the next day. Depending on the weather.’ Steina gestured towards the nearest end of the narrow room, where a grey woollen curtain served as a partition between the badstofa and a tiny parlour. ‘Sit in there,’ she said. ‘I’ll go find my sister.’

Lauga Jónsdóttir, Steina's younger sister, was weeding the meagre vegetable plot at a little distance from the croft. Bent over her task, she hadn't seen the District Commissioner arrive, but she heard her sister calling long before she came into sight.

'Lauga! Where are you? Lauga!'

Lauga rose to her feet and wiped her soiled hands on her apron. She didn't shout back to her sister, but waited patiently until Steina, running and tripping over her long skirts, spotted her.

'I've been looking everywhere for you!' Steina cried, out of breath.

'What on God's earth is wrong with you?'

'The Commissioner is here!'

'Who?'

'Blöndal!'

Lauga stared at her sister. 'District Commissioner Björn Blöndal? Wipe your nose, Steina, you're snotting.'

'He's sitting in the parlour.'

'Where?'

'You know, behind the curtain.'

'You left him there *by himself*?' Lauga's eyes grew wide.

Steina grimaced. 'Please come and talk to him.'

Lauga glared at her sister, then quickly untied her dirty apron and dropped it beside the lovage. 'I can't think of what goes through your head sometimes, Steina,' she muttered, as they walked quickly towards the croft. 'Leaving a man like Blöndal twiddling his thumbs in our badstofa.'

'In the parlour.'

'What difference does it make? I suppose you gave him the servants' whey to drink, too.'

Steina turned to her sister with a panicked expression. 'I didn't give him anything.'

'Steina!' Lauga broke into a little trot. 'He'll think us peasants!'

Steina watched her sister pick her way through the tussocks of grass. ‘We *are* peasants,’ she mumbled.

Lauga quickly washed her face and hands, and snatched a new apron from Kristín, the family’s workmaid, who had hidden herself in the kitchen at the sound of a stranger’s voice. Lauga found the District Commissioner seated at the little wooden table in the parlour, reading over a slip of paper. Expressing apologies for her sister’s discourteous reception, she offered him a plate of cold, hashed mutton, which he took gladly, albeit with a slightly injured air. She quietly stood aside as he ate, watching his fleshy lips wrap about the meat. Perhaps her Pabbi was to be promoted from District Officer to an even greater title. Perhaps he would receive a uniform, or a stipend from the Danish Crown. There might be new dresses. A new home. More servants.

Blöndal scraped his knife across the plate.

‘Would you like some skyr and cream, District Commissioner?’ she asked, taking the empty dish.

Blöndal waved his hands in front of his chest as if to decline, then paused. ‘Well, all right then. Thank you.’

Lauga blushed and turned to fetch the soft cheese.

‘And I would not object to coffee,’ he called after her as she ducked her head around the curtain.

‘What does he want?’ Steina asked, huddling by the fire in the kitchen. ‘I can’t hear anything except you, clomping up and down the corridor.’

Lauga shoved the dirty plate at her. ‘He hasn’t said anything yet. He wants skyr and coffee.’

Steina exchanged looks with Kristín, who rolled her eyes. ‘We have no coffee,’ Steina said quietly.

‘Yes we do. I saw some in the pantry last week.’

Steina hesitated. ‘I ... I drank it.’

‘Steina! The coffee isn’t for us! We save it for occasions!’

‘Occasions? The Commissioner never visits.’

‘The *District* Commissioner, Steina!’

‘The servants are coming back from Reykjavík soon. We might have more then.’

‘That’s then. What are we going to do now?’ Exasperated, Lauga pushed Kristín in the direction of the pantry. ‘Skr and cream! Hurry.’

‘I wanted to know what it tasted like,’ Steina offered.

‘It’s too late. Bring him some fresh milk instead. Bring everything in when it’s ready. Actually no, let Kristín. You look like you’ve been rolling in the dirt with the horses.’ Lauga shot a scathing look at the dung on Steina’s clothes and walked back down the corridor.

Blöndal was waiting for her. ‘Young lady. I suppose you are wondering at my occasioning your family with a visit.’

‘My name is Sigurlaug. Or Lauga, if you like.’

‘Quite. Sigurlaug.’

‘Is it some business of my father’s? He is –’

‘Southbound, yes, I know. Your sister told me, and ... Oh look, here she is.’

Lauga turned and saw Steina emerging round the side of the partition, carrying the soft cheese, cream and berries in one grimy hand, and the milk in the other. Lauga gave her sister a vexed look as Steina accidentally dragged the edge of the curtain through the skyr. Fortunately the District Commissioner seemed oblivious.

‘Sir,’ Steina mumbled. She set the bowl and cup on the table in front of him, and then gave an awkward curtsy. ‘May it do you good.’

‘Thank you,’ Blöndal replied. He sniffed the skyr appraisingly, then looked up at the two sisters. He smiled thinly. ‘Who is the elder?’

Lauga nudged Steina to prompt her, but she remained silent, gaping at the brilliant red of the man’s coat.

‘I am younger, District Commissioner,’ Lauga said eventually, smiling to show off her dimples. ‘By one year. Steinvör is twenty-one this month.’

‘Everyone calls me Steina.’

‘You are both very pretty,’ Blöndal said.

‘Thank you, sir.’ Lauga nudged Steina again.

‘Thank you,’ Steina mumbled.

‘Both have your father’s fair hair, though I see you have your mother’s blue eyes,’ he said, nodding at Lauga. He pushed the untouched bowl towards her and took up the milk. He sniffed it and set it down on the table again.

‘Please, sir, eat,’ Lauga said, motioning to the bowl.

‘Thank you, but I am suddenly sated.’ Blöndal reached into his coat pocket. ‘Now, I would have preferred to discuss this with the master of the house, but as District Officer Jón isn’t here and this cannot wait until his return, I see I must tell his daughters.’ He took up his sheet of paper and unfolded it upon the table for them to read.

‘I trust that you are familiar with the event that occurred at Illugastadir last year?’ he asked.

Steina flinched. ‘Do you mean the murders?’

Lauga nodded, her blue eyes wide with sudden solemnity. ‘The trial was held at your home.’

Blöndal inclined his head. ‘Yes. The murders of Natan Ketilsson the herbalist and Pétur Jónsson. As this most unfortunate and grievous tragedy occurred within the Húnavatn District, it was my responsibility to work with the magistrate and Land Court

in Reykjavík to come to some sort of arrangement regarding the persons accused.'

Lauga picked up the paper and walked to the window to read by its light. 'So it is all over.'

'On the contrary. The three accused were last October found guilty of both murder and arson in the court of this country. The case has now proceeded to the *Supreme* Court in Copenhagen, Denmark. The King ...' and here Blöndal paused for effect '... The King himself must learn of the crime, and agree with *my* original sentence of execution. As you can read for yourself, they have each received a capital sentence. It is a victory for justice, as I am sure you will agree.'

Lauga nodded absently, still reading. 'They're not being sent to Denmark?'

Blöndal smiled, and swung back on the wooden chair, lifting the heels of his boots off the ground. 'No.'

Lauga looked up at him, puzzled. 'Then, sir, excuse my ignorance, but where are they to be ...?' Her voice trailed off.

Blöndal scraped back his chair and rose to stand next to her at the window, ignoring Steina. He peered out through the dried sheep's bladder that had been pulled across to serve as a pane, noticing a small vein twisted in its dull surface. He shuddered. His own house had glass windows.

'They shall be executed here,' he said finally. 'In Iceland. In the north of Iceland, to be exact. I and the magistrate who presided at Reykjavík decided it would be ...' He hesitated, deliberating. 'More economical.'

'Really?'

Blöndal frowned at Steina, who was eyeing him with suspicion. She reached over and plucked the slip of paper out of Lauga's hand.

'Yes, although I will not deny that the execution also brings with it an opportunity for our community to witness the consequences for

grave misdemeanour. It requires careful handling. As you are aware, clever Sigurlaug, criminals of this stature are usually sent abroad for their punishment, where there are gaolhouses and the like. As it has been decided that the three will be executed in Iceland, in the same district in which they undertook their crime, we are in need of some sort of custodial holding until the date and place of execution have been agreed upon.

‘As you well know, we have no factories, no public house in Húnavatn that we may use to accommodate prisoners.’ Blöndal turned and eased himself back into the chair. ‘This is why I decided that they should be placed on farms, homes of upright Christians, who would inspire repentance by good example, and who would benefit from the work these prisoners do as they await their judgment.’

Blöndal leaned across the table towards Steina, who stared at him, one hand over her mouth and the other clutching the letter. ‘Icelanders,’ he continued, ‘who would be able to fulfil their duties as government officials by providing this accommodation.’

Lauga looked at the District Commissioner in bewilderment. ‘Can’t they be placed in holdings at Reykjavík?’ she whispered.

‘No. There are costs.’ He waved his hand in the air.

Steina’s eyes narrowed. ‘You’re putting them *here*? With us? Because the court in Reykjavík wants to avoid the cost of sending them abroad?’

‘Steina,’ Lauga warned.

‘Your family will be compensated,’ Blöndal said, frowning.

‘What are we supposed to do? Chain them to our bedposts?’

Blöndal slowly rose to his full height. ‘I have no choice,’ he said, his voice suddenly low and dangerous. ‘Your father’s title comes with responsibility. I’m sure he would not question me. Kornsó has too few hands to work it, and there is the issue of your family’s financial state.’ He approached Steina, looking down at her small, dirty face in

the dim light. ‘Besides, Steinvör, I will not suffer you and your family to hold all three convicts. It is only one of the women.’ He placed a heavy hand upon her shoulder, ignoring the way she recoiled. ‘You’re not afraid of your own sex now, are you?’

After Blöndal had left, Steina returned to the parlour and picked up the uneaten bowl of skyr. Cream had congealed at its rim. She shook with frustration and rage, and pressed the bowl hard into the table, biting her bottom lip. She screamed silently, willing the bowl to break, until the flood of anger passed. Then she returned to the kitchen.

