

# The Seagull's Laughter

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For my children, Kim, Noomi and Iduna.  
I hope we will always tell stories together.



## The Seagull's Laughter



# **PART ONE**





# 1

## *Malik*

### **Iceland, 1974**

I listened to the sharp crack as Snorri dropped ice cubes into two crystal glasses on the table between us. I continued to watch his face for any clue as to his thoughts, but his expression remained mild and affable – concealed, even. With calm concentration he filled the two glasses with water. His eyes did not seem to explore any memories and admitted no recognition of me. His fair complexion hid his age; the two missing fingers on his left hand, stunted ends blackened by frost, were the only marks he wore that alluded to his past, to the time and place at which our lives had become intertwined.

The walls of his study, similarly, were empty of pictures or maps. No artifact peered down from the bookshelves, no carved figure, grotesquely formed, reared its bald skull; square teeth bared menacingly, blackened eyes glinting with the dark polar winters. There was nothing in the room that alluded to the time that he had spent in the Arctic. The ice in

our glasses, enveloped by pouring water, glittered in the afternoon sun and threw spots of dancing, ethereal light about the walls. Once the glasses were full, Snorri placed the lid back on the jug, the jug back on the table, and reaching to the highest shelf of one of the bookcases, brought down a leather-bound book. The binding was blank.

'Rasmus,' said Snorri, and tapped a long finger against the first page, the first photograph. The image was grainy, a little unclear, but I recognised the man I knew to be my father: the heavy eyebrows, the sincere countenance, the informal but confident stance. He was standing on the deck of a ship with one foot squarely planted on a crate and one elbow resting on his knee. In the distance rose great icebergs, like castles and mountains, indistinct in the hazy stillness of the day and the passing of time. I traced the print below with my finger: *Polar Explorer, Charles Rasmus Stewart, Angmagssalik, Greenland, 1948.*

'A newspaper cutting,' Snorri explained. 'We received a lot of publicity: he knew how to make sure we did not go unnoticed.'

The book was filled with photographs chronicling the expedition: sleds and dogs appeared with ghostly clarity from between the pages, interspersed with unshaven faces discoloured from the chill of the air and inset with wild eyes. *The wilderness enduring.* My heart ached as I looked upon this bleak and distant landscape, teeming with life to the trained eye, but a frozen wasteland to those who only visited – like aliens from another world.

The images were distorted as the watery sun spilled again through the open window in rays and splashes. The room was comfortably cool. Outside, the wind blew with a gentle whisper, laced with an iciness that took the breath away, following its path over the glacier, across the barren flood plain and now to the openness of the Atlantic.

The final page of the album: a different image altogether. Against a hazy backdrop that previewed a cluster of skin

tents under bleak, snow-strewn mountains, there stood my father – the depiction of him with which I was now so familiar, never having encountered the man in flesh and blood – dressed in kamiks and bear-skin trousers as though he himself were one of our people. His hands, head and face were exposed. Beside him I recognised the towering figure of Snorri, curiously unmistakable in the same native attire, though the age and quality of the image almost obscured the features on his pale skin. And on my father's other side, small and unremarkable, stood a woman. Strange, that while I knew my father only from old photographs, I had never encountered an image of my mother. She looked young, some might say little more than a girl, her face full and round; and although the monochrome nature of the picture kept forever hidden the bright colours of her sewn-skin costume, her hair still fell to her hips in a striking raven-black cascade. There stirred no emotion within me, for I found myself unable to reconcile this unexpected image, immobile and un-living, with the mother I had known, the woman who had brought me into the world. But what else could I see? From the folds of her large skin hood there peered a face over her shoulder, a new, innocent face, black hair and plump cheeks, eyes screwed tightly shut.

'The child,' I began, though did not see the need to say any more as Snorri nodded his head and smiled wistfully.

'Yes. You could not have been more than a few months old.'

I looked again with some discomfort. I could not reconcile my existence with this moment of which I of course had no recollection. The two people who were responsible for my coming into the world, together in the same image – and I, too, was there: the life they had created. I was relieved that my eyes had evidently been closed when the photograph was taken. Without their strangeness I looked like a normal Greenlandic child, the evidence of my cursed nature hidden from the judgement of the world.

'And the girl standing beside you?' I added, resting my

finger on the figure, eager to deter the path of my wandering thoughts. Snorri hesitated, appeared almost bashful as he no doubt apprehended my meaning, the possibility of an accusation against him.

'But you were married,' I said; 'you have a family.'

'So did your father,' he answered, and at once the topic fell from his lips. For a moment there was silence, and the air became heavier as the wind dipped momentarily. 'I was very sorry to hear of his passing.'

I sensed the sincerity of his remark, though I knew their friendship to have come to an end many years previously. I only nodded in response. I had not known the man.

Stirring himself into motion, Snorri took a seat, silently and almost apologetically in the chair opposite mine. The early spring wind picked up once more and sent a sharp gust through the open window. The panes rattled. The ice in our glasses had all but melted.

'I would very much like to know,' he said, 'how you came to be here. In this country, in my house, so many miles from your home.' As the query came to an end, the wind made a sudden exit from the room, leaving in its wake an open, peaceful sort of quiet in which one could almost hear the swell of the tempestuous sea and the creeping advance of the ancient glacial ice.

'I was guided here,' I said quietly, unabashedly, 'by a helping spirit.'

My heart sank in my chest as I mentioned my absent friend. I considered telling Snorri, there and then, that my helping spirit had in fact gone missing, and it was the continued search for him that had brought me here, to Snorri's home. But I could not bring myself to say it - what would he think of me? I fought the bizarre urge to smile as I thought about how I would ask Snorri if he had seen *Eqingaleq*: an ancient figure padding along the Reykjavík streets, perhaps, in worn sealskin kamiks and bearskin trousers, suspiciously eyeing up the passers-by with their

plastic umbrellas. But they would not be able to see him, of course. Snorri would not be able to see him.

I glanced back to Snorri and saw that he was looking at me thoughtfully. Yet there was no hint of derision in his gaze, no eyebrow raised in scepticism nor patronising sympathy – something I had come to expect from those who knew only the culture they had been brought up in. But this man had spent time in the far north, that much was true, he had lived amongst my people, taken a woman there; adopted our clothes and customs as his own. My heart warmed towards him that he should understand.

'As it is just the two of us here,' he said, 'perhaps you might like to tell me your story.'

*'My story?'*

'The story of the path that has brought you here, and the reason for your journey.'

I looked down at the photographs on the table. Disconcerted by the blurred faces of those people who had since passed away I instead studied the shapes of the mountains in the distance. I saw reflected in them the warm recollections of home, the landscape captured so teasingly in these old, grainy images. I closed my tired eyes, and the windswept Icelandic coast evaporated and was lost.



## *About the Author*

Holly grew up in Derbyshire but has always been drawn to the sea. She has written from a young age. Her love affair with island landscapes was kick-started on a brief visit to the Faroe Islands at the age of eighteen, en route to Iceland. She was immediately captivated by the landscape, weather, and way of life and it was here that she conceived the idea for her first novel, *The Eagle and The Oystercatcher*. Holly studied Icelandic, Norwegian and Old Norse at University College London. She also studied as an exchange student at The University of Iceland (Háskóli Íslands) and spent a memorable summer working in a museum in South Greenland.

She decided to start a family young, and now has three small children. Holly helps run *Life & Loom*, a social and therapeutic weaving studio in Hull. She likes to escape from the busyness of her life by working on her novels and knitting Icelandic wool jumpers.