

FREYJA



A Novel

"An eerie novel that will keep you up
late into the night." —Eowyn Ivey

MARGRÉT ANN THORS

Freyja

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*Spiegel
and Grau*





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for my family

Thought and Memory
fly every day
over all the world;
I worry for Thought
that he might not return,
but I worry more for Memory.

—*The Prose Edda*

A Memory

Black-sand beach, silver sky, air all ice and salt and bite. A little girl with white-blond hair lowers her lips to speak to the sea.

She has a grievance against the water's gods and monsters—among them Rán, the goddess who sits on the ocean floor, capturing seafaring men in her net, and the great bull-headed whale, who swims inshore to coax dumb cattle to their watery graves. She calls out to the spooked water-horse, the nykur, who lures little girls into the deep, only to drown them. Mostly, she speaks to her long-dead mother.

The girl's fingers, thin and cold, are interlaced with mine.

Goose bumps dapple our arms. The fists of the sea pummel our calves. The undertow's claws yank at our ankles, tossing our balance off-kilter.

"We shouldn't be here," I yell over the crashing waves, but the girl already knows this. She warned me not to come.

I clutch a rock ledge with one hand and hold tight to hers with the other. The grip of our fingers loosens. She walks deeper into the tide, whispering, unafraid. When she looks back, her milk-blue eyes are elsewhere.

Tears and sea-wind wet my cheeks. I want to pull her close to me, toward sand and shoreline. I shape my lips to her name, Freyja, as familiar to me as my own.

A bright flare of moon explodes from behind the clouds. Now only the tips of our fingers touch.

For the rest of my life, I will feel her small wet hand in mine. I will feel how she let me go.

Or maybe, I won't.

Because sometimes my memory of this night flickers differently.

Sometimes, I recall yanking her white-blond hair and holding her head underwater until the bubbles stopped. I recall the ache of my hands—the ice, the struggle. The flail of her legs—and then, their stillness. The stone of her body sinking.

Am I a monster? Am I any different from the mythic beasts that curse this stretch of sea?

I'll never know. My memory of this night shifts with the tide.

Monday



1

Reykjavík, 2018

The envelope arrived on a Monday. Someone had slipped it into our mailbox unstamped, unaddressed. The flap was sealed with a piece of Scotch tape, and scrawled on the front was my name, Unnur, in black ink.

My birthday was in June, my daughter Lilja's in December. She received two cards total, *Congratulations on turning seven!*, delivered months ago. I didn't recognize this handwriting. I didn't like the twinge of unease—quick, cold—that coursed through me.

On instinct I glanced at Lilja, half expecting her to have disappeared. But there she was: crouched by the door, tongue out in determination, looping her laces into bunny ears. Still learning to tie her shoes. Still here.

I teased a finger into the sealed envelope flap, a breath away from tearing it open. But then my phone dinged with a reminder about the parent-teacher conference. I tucked the envelope under my arm as Lilja shimmied into a puffy parka, sun-yellow like her hair.

“Let’s take a look, sweetheart.” With my thumb and forefinger, I angled my daughter’s chin to the light, studying the greasy, purpling bruise on her right eye. Over the weekend, I had crashed my car into a pile of snow. The car had stopped; Lilja had not. Her head whacked the back of the passenger seat, and since then, she’d looked like she had caught a left hook.

“My body is healing my black eye,” she said proudly, squinting as I forced her face toward a lamp. “Thank you, body!”

I shoved the envelope and the rest of the mail into my purse and hustled outside, clicking the faulty key fob for what felt like the hundredth time to get the car door to unlock. Though the temperature flirted with a freeze, my underarms were damp with sweat. I hated meetings with Lilja’s teacher. I hated that I hated them. I hated that I wanted to look forward to them, and I hated that in another life, I probably would have.

“Is Pabbi really coming tomorrow?” Lilja asked, plaintive, as I pulled out of the apartment parking lot. “Can he pick me up from school? Can we get pizza?”

One eye still on the road, I tapped my phone—no calls, no texts, not a word from Núi, Lilja’s father, who would return to Iceland tomorrow for the first time in two years. The occasion? An upcoming custody meeting at the district commissioner’s office.

“I think Pabbi will be pretty tired from all the travel,” I said evasively, trying to spare her feelings. Núi was nothing if not unreliable. “And he won’t be here in time to get you from school, sweetheart. We’ll see about pizza.”

Pizza. The blood-curdling way he plucked each piece of pepperoni off the pie before taking a bite.

“Do you think Pabbi will still recognize me even though I’m taller now?” In the rearview mirror I watched her stare at the window, appraising her reflection. “Because last time I saw him it was all the way in, what’s it called again?”

“Amsterdam,” I said.

“In Amsterdam. And remember how I got a purple dragon face paint?”

“Of course. The picture’s on the fridge.”

“And remember how I ate a whole octopus?”

“I remember you tried a piece of fried calamari, yes.”

“And remember how—”

“Let’s save the memories for Pabbi, hm?” I tried not to tally how long it had been since Lilja had seen her parents in the same room. We had promised that our family would be different, but old patterns die hard. We’d both been left as children, and so in due time we left each other.

I prayed this visit would be like all his others: brief and unremarkable. In fact, unremarkable was what I prayed for most in my life. Lie low, keep Lilja safe. Keep my past bound and gagged in a basement, accessible only by trapdoor, key lost even to me.

We parked. I grabbed my purse, half wishing for the envelope to slip out, slice into the snow, disappear until the thaw. Like a bed of flowers. Like a body.



We hustled down the hallway, wet boots squeaking on the shiny linoleum floor. The door to Lilja’s classroom was propped open, and a child-sized desk chair was positioned against the wall. I dragged the chair, screeching it across the floor, motioning for her to sit. My palm found the top of her head, her bird’s nest of unbrushed curls. “Everything will be fine, my love.” I listened to myself speak these words and told myself to believe them.

When I entered the classroom, her teacher, Brynja, a big-boned woman with long gray hair tied, as ever, in a tight ponytail, was shouting at a laptop.

“CAN. YOU. HEAR. ME. NOW.”

Nói’s voice crackled through the speakers. “Hello? Can you hear me? Should I continue? I was just saying—”

“Knock knock,” I said in English.

“Oh, lovely. Good to see you, Unnur. What do you say we turn him off?”

I covered my mouth to conceal a smile. “Please do.”

Nói was monologuing about continental Europe's superior internet providers when Brynja shut the laptop. Silence settled over the room. At least he had tried to show up. Progress, I supposed.

"Sit, sit," she said. "You're late and you're wet, but that's neither here nor there. Let's talk about Lilja." Her glasses slid down the bridge of her nose, landing at the bulbous tip. "How are things at home?"

"Oh, great," I said immediately, relieved to hear that my accent was good today, my pronunciation fluent. "She's on a fairy kick, so her room has turned into an enchanted forest. We've got a wishing well, glow-in-the-dark butterflies, the whole thing."

"Lovely," Brynja said with a half smile. "The imagination!" Then she cleared her throat. "Now, about her Icelandic."

I glanced at the closed laptop, grateful Nói wasn't here. He had abandoned next to all parental duties, but when it came to Lilja's command of Icelandic he was interested, attentive, concerned. All the qualities missing in our marriage.

"Right," I whispered, conscious of Lilja in the hallway. "Her Icelandic."

"I assume you speak only English with Lilja at home? That being the case, I wonder if there are any relatives, or perhaps friends of yours, she can talk to? Practice is so important. We see it often among foreign families, where —"

I couldn't help but correct her. "I'm not foreign. I'm Icelandic, it's just that I lived in—"

"America, yes. Lilja has explained."

I tried to think of a context in which Lilja would have needed to explain to her teacher that I was born here, but that after the last summer of my childhood, I was shipped overseas to a pair of distant, childless relatives in the States who were supposedly related to the father I had never met. My teens and early twenties had transpired in clean, East Coast American English, and I didn't speak another word of Icelandic until I was nearly thirty and overheard a man—Nói—talking loudly on the phone in the lobby of a Connecticut library. As he tells it, I stood, jaw loose, staring at him for

the duration of the call, and when he finally hung up, I asked in English, “Were you speaking Icelandic?”

That was almost nine years ago, and still there was rust on my tongue. Still, I spoke to Lilja in English, unless we were in public. Then I hardly spoke at all.

Often, in the thick of winter especially, I contemplated moving back to America—if not for the language then for the anonymity. For the thousands of additional miles between a certain stretch of black-sand beach and me. But the thought of Lilja, who said things like, “Mamma, I’m your little cuddle-bug,” crouching under a desk during an active-shooter drill, or of her teachers stowing a loaded gun in a locked desk drawer in case they needed to defend their classroom, was more than I could stomach. Despite wind, despite snow, despite streets that were never properly plowed, despite my disdain for Icelandic grammar, always my conclusion was this: Better to be alone and safe and covered by healthcare on this ice cube than to be alone and scared and uninsured on the other side of the Atlantic. Even if it meant Lilja’s teachers thought I was an idiot.

“Unnur?”

I shook off my thoughts. “Sorry, I was just—”

“As I was saying, for all this talk of the language”—Icelanders were always talking of the language—“I want to emphasize that I have absolutely no worries about Lilja playing Peter.” The drama students were putting on a performance of *Peter Pan* later that week, and Lilja had been cast as the lead. She didn’t stop at memorizing her own lines; she wanted to commit the entire play to memory. “Mamma, what if the other kids forget their lines and I have to play all the different parts?” she’d explained to me. Catastrophizing, preparing for the worst, feeling like the fate of the play—the world!—rested on her shoulders: Lilja was, without question, my child.

“In fact,” Brynja added, “I think it’s brilliant that she’ll be our star.”

I agreed. Lilja was good. She so easily became someone else.

I knew the feeling.



Just open it.

I stared at the short stack of mail on the kitchen counter, the mystery envelope on top. As I patted Lilja's head, asking absently if she wanted a snack, my mind tallied the people who could have put the envelope in our mailbox. Not a bill collector; they wouldn't hand-deliver an unaddressed letter. Not Núi; he wasn't due until tomorrow. I doubted it was from a neighbor; we had lived in this building for years and people chronically kept to themselves. Maybe a mom from Lilja's elementary school? But I couldn't remember the last time I had exchanged more than a half-hearted hæ with any of those women. A customer from the bakery where I worked, maybe? Yeah, right; what was I to them but a hand holding a pair of metal tongs, shuttling their breakfast into a wax paper pastry bag, taking too long?

I sliced Lilja an apple and spooned peanut butter and a touch of almond milk into a bowl, thinning the mixture so she wouldn't choke. *For god's sake*, Núi would sigh, *she's not an infant, just give her normal peanut butter*. He was right, of course. I knew I was overprotective.

Lilja took her snack to the living room, chewing with her mouth open as she walked. Alone in the kitchen, I sucked in a breath. On an exhale, I tore the tape sealing the mystery envelope.

For a fraction of a second, I was suspended in space and time—neither before nor after, only now. Then, a thin paper note fluttered to my feet. I retrieved it with my thumb and forefinger, holding it up like a specimen. Written in black ink were four words that catapulted me back to a night that cleaved my life in two.

Hæ, Unna. Remember me?

I braced a hand on the kitchen counter. Unna was what Freyja called me—a name known only to us. She thought it was clever, a play on words, since *unna*, which sounds a lot like my name, Unnur, is an antiquated way of saying *to love* or *to cherish*. For my part, I thought the nickname was

pointless; in fact, I thought it wasn't a nickname at all. It was Unnur, with a little laziness at the end.

Only one person in the world could have written these words. And she was presumed dead.

Dark Valley, 1990

When I trace a line backward in time from the night of Freyja's disappearance, I arrive at the first day of the final summer of my childhood. It began with what felt like a very long drive.

"*Unnur*," said my aunt's freeloading boyfriend, Viktor. He spat out my name like a bad taste. "If you don't quit kicking the seat, we'll open the door and roll you onto the road. You know I mean it."

We both knew he didn't. Aunt Sandra would have stopped him. I was sure of this.

This was early August, age eleven. Sandra had known Viktor for a year and he had been living in our cramped apartment in Keflavík, a few miles from the US naval base, for nine months. Sandra's identical twin sister, my mother, had died when I was just under two years old, so I didn't remember anything about her. "She looked just like me," Sandra sometimes said. Then she would pat my cheek and add, "But quit staring, love."