Chapter One

Guðrún

Only when she sits on the far reach of the jetty, her finned feet drifting in the icy waters of Arnarfjörður, does the tightness in her chest finally ease and her breath return to her like a tide coming home. Her lower belly expands to gather the cold air of the fjord morning, before she parts her lips and guides the mouthpiece until the soft bite tabs find their familiar place between her teeth. Her lips close around the flange as she draws a slow test breath, the regulator opening with a quiet flutter, a cool ribbon of air touches her tongue and palate like the first hint of winter wind. She glances at her pressure gauge, ensuring the tank is full and the valve open, then places both hands on the weathered planks and pushes herself forward, to slide into the water with the calm certainty of someone returning to her element. The ripple that marks her passing spreads once, twice, then disappears into the stillness of the fjord.

The water around her is cold and startlingly clear, the pale Icelandic light filtering down in soft, shifting bands that reach farther than landlubbers might expect. The kelp parts gently around her as she descends, its broad fronds move with the slow rhythm of the current. Small saithe slip between the stems in quick, muted flashes, and a single cod drifts past with unhurried ease. Even the smallest lives — a darting amphipod, a nudibranch bright as a dropped ember — seem to reveal themselves to her in perfect clarity, as if the fjord knows how badly she needs this moment of belonging.

And yet it had been here, in the underwater world, the place she had called home for more than thirty years, that she had first noticed the changes in her body. What others might have

brushed off as tiredness or stress, Guðrún recognized immediately as something more serious. She had tightened her straps thousands of times in every season and every sea, and now, without any accident or warning, her hands felt clumsy, especially her right thumb and forefinger. What was she supposed to make of that?

Around the same time, pulling on her wetsuit had become harder, the sleeves resisting her in a way they never had before. Climbing boat and jetty ladders, a task she had performed with effortless confidence since her toddler days in Sundhöllin, the Reykjavík pool where even her mother had learned to swim, now required more effort than it should. She had noticed the change last fall, and the memory of that first moment of doubt still sat like a lump of marl at the top of her sternum. It was the not knowing that frightened her most, the sense that her own body was keeping a secret from her.

So instead of a New Year's resolution, Guðrún wrote a list of her shortcomings and brought it to her Reykjavík doctor within a week. *Yawing right*, it began. *Hard to hold trim. Slow buoyancy corrections.* She remembered how her hand had trembled slightly as she passed the paper across the desk, and how she had tried to hide it.

Margrét Helgudóttir, the statuesque GP who had started kindergarten the same year Guðrún graduated from Menntaskólinn við Sund, laughed out loud while still managing to look earnest and concerned. "Describe it to me in words I can understand," she said, placing a hand over Guðrún's.

Guðrún pointed to each finger, toe, and limb as she listed their new frailties. The more she spoke, the more exposed she felt, as if naming each change made it more real. "I know something is off," she said at last, meeting the doctor's gaze. Her voice sounded thin. "Do not

send me away with a pee test and play that game until summer. Tell me what you think, and what steps we will take to figure it out."

While Margrét spoke of vitamin deficiencies, thyroid issues, and palsy, Guðrún's mind had already sprinted far ahead to MS and ALS, the two most fucking awful diseases an active, sharp, in-the-middle-of-her-life and at-the-height-of-her-power woman could possibly have to contend with. She had researched both to the nth degree, heart thudding like she was reading her own obituary. For days, images of hollow-looking men and women, in wheelchairs and beds, with tubes snaking in and out of their disappearing bodies, haunted her waking hours and sleepless nights. Neither disease was imaginable in any way, and the fear of them sat under her ribs like a live wire while she nodded politely at talk of vitamins.

She consented to every test and referral, even though the whole regime felt like something that would have worn Muhammad Ali to the nub. His fate had been tragic, yes, but at least one could point to repeated head trauma and say there was a reason. What had she ever done except spend her entire life in the cleanest, least polluted environment, eating right, exercising every single fucking day, not smoking, hardly ever drinking because diving with a hangover was inviting disaster, going to the dentist like clockwork, and finally, gloriously, enjoying her prayed-for menopause because she no longer had to lug period gear in her dive bag. Hallelujah to that small mercy.

And yet here she was, months later, sitting in Doctor Margrét's office with the weight of nerve conduction studies, two electromyographies, X-rays, scans, referrals, and specialist opinions pressing down on her like a tide she could not swim against. She remembered the way the room seemed too quiet, too bright, too still. She remembered how Margrét folded her hands, how her own stomach dropped before a single word was spoken.

Then the sentence came, soft and careful, and it carved itself into her memory with perfect clarity.

“I am so sorry, Guðrún, but the neurologist and I, after going over all the markers and results together, are very certain that you are experiencing early symptoms of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. ALS.”

Afterward, she drove through Eldhraun with the diagnosis ringing in her ears, the road cutting through a landscape that looked older than grief. The moss had shifted to its fall colours, olive and grey and brown, soft on the surface and razor-sharp underneath. Black lava ridges rose and fell like frozen waves, stretching as far as she could see in the afternoon light. Here, the earth had once torn itself open and poured molten rock over a region bigger than Paris. The scale of it made her feel small in a way that hurt, a reminder that yes, life mattered, just not individual ones. Trillions of living cells and beings had perished during the eruption, but no matter, life goes on, greedy, stubborn, indifferent. She kept driving.

By the time she reached Bíldudalur, the sky had gone flat and colourless. She parked, walked inside, and went straight to her bedroom without turning on a single light. She did not sleep, not really, but she fell into bed all the same, body heavy with shock and exhaustion. Hours passed without shape. Then morning sunlight slipped through the curtains and found her face, easing her out of the heaviness with a patient pull until she sat, then stood. The weight didn’t lift, but it stopped feeling directionless. She was going diving.

And now she sinks into the kelp cathedral, where long ribbons of dabberlock sway and sugar kelp lifts broad, golden fronds toward her. She angles her shoulders, glides forward with a

slow kick. A frond brushes her thigh, cool through the neoprene, while beyond it the forest fades into a soft green haze. Visibility is good today; the farthest stems dissolve into pale distance like pillars in mist.

Northern prawns hover near the fingerlike holdfasts less than a meter from her mask, their bodies crackling as they flick away, the vibration running through her chest. She steadies herself with a small scull of her hands, drifting above a common starfish whose tube feet work in tiny, deliberate pulses along the rock. Ahead, two green sea urchins nestle in a crevice, their spines shifting as the tide breathes through the forest, and she angles her fins to sink a little lower, stirring a soft cloud of silt that hangs in the water before thinning into nothing.

A sculpin lies motionless against mottled stones until a single blink betrays it. A shimmer of amphipods scatters at her passing, sparks of motion brushing the edge of her vision. She lifts one knee to avoid a patch of barnacles opening and closing in slow, tidal cadence. A drifting sheet of dead man's rope brushes her forearm and trails away into dimmer water, where a hermit crab trudges across the substrate and a fan of red algae deepens in colour as the light thins.

She exhales slowly, bubbles rising past her cheeks. Her fingers drift open, the water smoothing the small tremors. Warmth and oxygen spread through her limbs, loosening what had been tight for days. Each measured breath pushes something heavy out of her, and lets the cool, quiet beauty of the forest settle in its place.

She hovers there, held between the near brush of waving fronds and the far, dim reach of the fjord's hush, and the clarity comes softly: this place, these moraine-ridged depths, are where her life matters. And, of course, it shall come to its end here too. Not for a moment can she consider a life that is no life; days, months, weeks passing without diving, without walking, later

without swallowing, only to await the greatest cruelty, the loss of breath. A diver without air is already dead.

And dead she shall be, before this incurable, untreatable disease robs her of everything that has ever held meaning. For days she has tossed ideas, looked up right-to-die societies, and the other ones too, the ones that promise tips and even tools for a fee. A suicide guru in New Zealand chased down her email address and sent an offer “to die for”: a kit containing a sedative liquid and a plastic bag with a drawstring. Æ, jæja. Guðrún cannot think of anything worse than lying on her couch and pulling a sheet of Saran wrap over her face. She might as well just jump into the fjord without a tank. And there it is, the answer. Of course. She shall die where she lived, where she spent her very best time on this earth.

She feels almost giddy as she moves through the next few days, as if a weight she had carried for months has finally slipped from her shoulders. The dread that had pressed against her ribs is gone, replaced by a bright, steady calm. She wakes each morning with a sense of direction she had not felt for too long.

She sends off her last batch of data and field notes, kelp growth curves, nutrient assays, her final thoughts on sustainable cultivation. The work feels clean and complete, a circle closed. Then she drives the coastal roads she knows by heart, stopping in Bolungarvík, Grundarfjörður, Hvolsvöllur. She visits colleagues, friends, and neighbours, sharing coffee, small stories, quiet laughter. Nobody notices anything amiss. No one sees the slight tremor in her right hand, even though she makes no effort to cover it up. She is lighter than she has been in months.

She drives to Reykjavík for something she has put off far too long: the formalities of her estate, the paperwork that will place everything she owns into the hands of a nonprofit devoted to restoring northern kelp forests. The idea pleases her. It feels right. She stays in a fancy motel on the way back, enjoys the softness of the sheets, the warmth of the shower, the anonymity of a room that is not hers.

At home, she tidies with deliberate care. She sorts, cleans, arranges. She leaves her house in the kind of order she has always admired in others but never quite achieved herself. Each task brings a small, private satisfaction. Each drawer closed feels like a chapter finished.

Through it all, the calm stays with her. She feels no regret, no doubt. Only the deep, anchoring peace that comes from choosing her own way forward, from knowing that whatever time remains will be spent exactly where she belongs, in the world that has always held her most gently.

Monday arrives clear and cold. Guðrún greets it in her doorway, the familiar weight of her wetsuit draped over her arm, a cup of dark, rich coffee steaming in her hand. *My last day*, she thinks, and does not feel sad. The drive to Hrafnhólar Cove is short, the road winding along the inner curve of the fjord. Morning light glances off the water in long, silver strokes. When she reaches the small pullout, she parks, steps out, and feels the cold air settle around her like a second skin as she strips to her bathing suit. She works one leg into the wetsuit, then the other, feeling the faint resistance as the neoprene clings to her calves. It is harder than it used to be, her fingers slower, her grip less certain, but the difficulty brings a small smile. This is the last time

she will coax the suit into place, the last time she will smooth the folds along her hips, tug the stubborn zipper up her spine.

Her gear waits: mask, snorkel, hood, weight belt, gloves. She takes each one, looks at it with affection, dons it in a way that feels ceremonial. She flexes her fingers inside the thick gloves, notices the slight weakness now in three of them. The tank stands upright beside the car, cool metal beading with condensation. She lifts it onto her back, settling the straps across her shoulders. The weight is familiar, grounding. She checks the gauge, watches the needle hover lower than usual, and breathes in the quiet that fills her chest.

At the water's edge she slips the fins over her heels, tightens the straps with steady, deliberate motions. Each gesture feels like part of a ritual she has known her whole life. She lowers her mask, pulls its strap into place, and wades in backward, her eyes scanning the familiar landscape.

The fjord is still. The tide is turning, the water drawing itself inward in a long, slow pull. She steps deeper, the cold rising along her suit, the world narrowing to the hush of her breath and the gentle tightening of pressure as she slips below the surface. Kelp brushes her arms as she descends, the forest swaying in long, slow gestures that welcome her back.

She swims toward the mouth of the fjord, toward the dark silhouette of the tidal turbine. The water around it is deeper, greener, threaded with the low hum of machinery. She pauses, suspended in the dim light, feeling the clarity she has carried all week settle into place like a final exhale.

She could have chosen to simply dive to the depth of the basin. Just behind the sill at the fjord's mouth, the seafloor drops to nearly two hundred meters, a cold, murky world where all

light disappears and the weight of water becomes unbearable. If she sat down there and allowed her tank to run empty, even a panicked, instinct-driven ascent would not get her to the surface in time. But it would be dark and frightening and lonely. Up here, in the kelp beds, there is light and life, and her own body will serve to sustain all her beloved creatures.

But she must ensure that her own weakness and potential last-minute fear do not send her scurrying topside. A weight belt is easily undone, a grip loosened, a line cut. Guðrún senses that she can do this only once. If she does not die on her first try, she might never find the courage again.

The turbine, then. She had vehemently protested its installation last year, to no avail, of course. What was the word of a lowly marine biologist to the movers and shakers? Workers and trucks and helicopters had amassed at the fjord's entrance for weeks, and now a flat rectangle sits on the water like a stranded barge, held in place by mooring lines that crisscross the fjord's throat. Below it dangles the turbine, huge and vibrating, covered in barnacles, bivalves, algae, and crustaceans. Admittedly, the thing acts like a reef, providing shelter to small schooling fish and juvenile gadoids, while also creating hiding spots for predators. Despite her reservations, the constantly humming structure has neither affected migration fish nor her kelp beds. What better way to make her peace with it than to allow it to anchor her.

Guðrún pulls the handcuffs she bought in a sex shop in Reykjavík from her belt and smiles around her mouthpiece. With a swift, decisive motion, she secures her wrist to a handhold on the turbine's shell. There. Now. She will wait, and then she will not anymore. So easy. She searches for fear and regret but finds only peace. There.

A shift in the water reaches her, a subtle change in the current, a faint vibration through the metal beneath her hand. She turns her head slightly. Not darkness, not a lurking shape, but movement against the daylight: a silhouette rising along the taut mooring line that leads to the turbine, the path maintenance divers always take.

Maintenance. On this day of all days.

In her narrow, tunnel-focused mind, she had not spared a single thought for something as mundane, and infuriatingly predictable, as maintenance.

A beam of white cuts through the green, from above and to the side, angled down in a controlled sweep. It lands across her mask, bright enough to make her blink.

The diver descends into view, the outline resolving cleanly as they approach along the turbine's steel holds. Maintenance gear. Inspection lights. He stops in front of her, close enough that she can see the surprise in the tilt of his head, the quick, practiced assessment in the way he studies her posture, her equipment, the unnatural stillness of her hovering form.

The diver lifts one hand and cuts it upward through the water, the sharp, universal gesture every diver knows: up, now.

Then he reaches for the pouch at his hip, pulls out a tool, and works with swift, efficient movements. She feels a sudden shift in her buoyancy, the gentle grip of his hand closing around her arm.

And together, they ascend slowly toward the surface.