

# THE GIRL WITHOUT SKIN

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With a heavy drone from its whirring rotor, the Bell Huey helicopter from Air Greenland chopped its way to the edge of the ice cap.

Apart from the pilot, the passengers were the same four archaeologists, Malik, Matthew and Officer Ottesen, who would be replacing Officer Aqqalu, who had been guarding the mummy overnight. Matthew was sitting on the starboard side of the angular helicopter body, and he could feel the sun roast him through the large, square windows.

Grey-black mountains glided past underneath them in long, serrated, undulating rows. There were still several large patches of snow hiding in the darkness and cold of a gorge, while in other places the mountains were covered by green summer growth. The sea was a brilliant bright blue, speckled with white and turquoise growlers that had broken off the edge of the ice cap at the heart of the fjord.

The helicopter banked to the right, and Matthew's gaze was drawn down towards the shimmering surface of the sea.

'Do you see those two traces in the water right there?' Malik exclaimed, pointing.

'Where there's a little bit of foam?'

'Yes, that's it.' Malik nodded enthusiastically. 'Two whales just

came up for air. Humpbacks, I think. They had broad, speckled tails.'

'So they won't be coming back up for a while—is that what you're saying?'

'No, I think they'll reappear a little further down, in the direction of the foam. There aren't any boats around to disturb them.'

The sea turned into sky when the helicopter straightened up. Then mountains and sea once more. They had followed the arm of the fjord most of the way, but now they changed course and were flying across a broad expanse of dark mountains. In front of them the patches of ice grew bigger and more frequent, and the bright white light from the ice cap began to intensify.

'Did you know that the ice cap is bigger than France and the UK together?' Matthew said, without taking his eyes off the window in the side door.

'Really?' Malik said. 'No, I've never heard that.' He had a camera borrowed from the newspaper around his neck.

Matthew turned his attention to the museum curator. 'Do you have more information about the guy who was found? The Norseman?'

The man shook his head. 'No, sadly. We still don't know if he's a Norseman, but I fail to see how he couldn't be. When you find a naked, mummified Scandinavian wrapped in reindeer skin at the very edge of the ice cap, what else could it be?'

'But I thought the ice cap was larger back when the Norsemen were here?'

The curator looked up. 'Yes, it was, and that's what's bothering me. My theory is that there might have been a mountain cabin somewhere nearby.'

'But that doesn't change the fact that he was found naked and wrapped in fur in a crevasse...'

'You're still fishing for a violent death?'

Matthew nodded. 'He could easily have been killed fighting an

Inuit, or been chucked into the crevasse as a sacrifice, couldn't he?'

'A human sacrifice that late in the Middle Ages would be atypical, but living conditions were probably extreme in the last few decades the Scandinavians were here, so we can't rule it out.' He combed his dense beard with his fingers. 'When times are hard, people sometimes throw morality and ethics overboard.'

'But what about a battle?'

'You're suggesting he might have been killed by an Inuit?'

'Yes.'

'It just so happens there were no Inuit anywhere in south-west Greenland when the Norsemen arrived, so it was actually their country rather than the Inuit's, but the Norsemen's many trips to the north attracted the Inuit, who began coming south, and so in that respect the Inuit came closer. It's possible that the Inuit developed a taste for the Norsemen's sheep, which were easy to catch and very tasty...so different from the fish and seals which the Inuit had lived on for generations. And yes, it's also possible that it might have been the Inuit who expelled the Norsemen from their settlements.'

'Hang on,' Matthew said, taking out his mobile. 'Let me just make some notes in case we go for that angle...great. Okay, so you're saying that the Danes, who came later, didn't take the land from the Inuit, seeing as the Inuit had themselves stolen it from the Norsemen three hundred years earlier?'

'It's a plausible theory, but we can't prove it. Besides, if I kick you now, it doesn't give you the right to kick me in twenty years, does it?'

'So the Inuit arrived in Greenland *after* the Norsemen, and then *they* wandered down and into the land of the Norsemen?'

'Yes, that part we can prove. It's just the business with battles and wars which is dubious, even though the *Historia Norvegiae* states that Norse hunters came across small men in the north, whom the Norsemen named *skrællinger*, and that these small men got "white wounds" if they were slightly injured, but would bleed violently

when fatally wounded.’ He gave a light shrug. ‘You might well ask yourself why it was so important to pass on to posterity the bit about superficial and fatal injuries, unless it was because it related to battle, especially if we bear in mind that the same passage states that these skrællinger used walrus tusks and sharp stones for weapons.’

‘Hello, Ottesen?’ The pilot’s voice could be heard over the headsets, and attracted everyone’s attention. ‘Ottesen, could you come over here and take a look? I think we have a problem.’

The three Danish archaeologists started to look around the cabin, whispering and nodding.

‘Is something wrong with the engine?’ Matthew wondered aloud.

‘It’s not that,’ Malik said quickly. His face was pressed against the window, his eyes aimed in the direction they were flying.

‘Then what is it?’

‘Look down.’

Matthew was aware of the curator leaning over him to get a look too, and moved his head close to the window. They were near the edge of the glacier. Beneath them the sea was dense with pack ice. In front of them the endless whiteness stretched out as far as the light and the eye could reach. It hurt his eyes. Millions of white crystals. Except in one place. One spot. Right where the Norseman mummy had been found and Aqqalu had kept watch. There the ice was glossy red.

There was silence in the cabin. The only sound was the chop-chop of the rotors.

‘Is that...’ Matthew’s voice trailed off. ‘Is that Aqqalu?’

‘I know Aqqalu,’ Malik stuttered. ‘We were at school together.’

‘But—’

‘I don’t know, but who else could it be?’

The curator sank back into his seat. ‘Do you think it’s him? But what happened?’

‘Nanook,’ Malik whispered. He didn’t take his eyes off the ice

beneath them. 'I kept saying I should have played my drum before anyone slept here. You can't just pull an old, dead soul into the light like that.'

'We're landing,' Ottesen's voice announced. 'You all need to stay inside while I get out and secure the area. A Sikorsky will take off from Nuuk in ten minutes and fly here to meet me. You'll stay in this helicopter and be sent back straightaway. Understand?'

Matthew leaned close against the window. The ice was glistening. The red was glistening. Growing. The body of the helicopter turned and prepared to land on the spot where Aqqalu should have been waiting for them. Matthew didn't know whether to look, but when Malik very slowly raised his camera and started pressing the shutter release, he too fixed his eyes on the ice beneath them.

Aqqalu was naked. His clothes had been dumped in a pile not far from his body. He was lying on his back with his arms stretched out to the sides. He had been gutted from his groin to his breastbone. The sides of his stomach had been pulled apart, and were hanging over the ice. His abdominal cavity was black from dried blood, as were his skin and flesh, which were exposed. The bottom of his rib cage shone white amid the darkness and the red. His organs had been ripped out of him and were lying on the ice, while his intestines seemed to be missing completely. There was blood spatter a metre away from the body. In one place several metres.

Malik gulped. 'This was no polar bear.'

The helicopter hit the ice unexpectedly hard, and they all jolted. Matthew's head bumped against the windowpane.

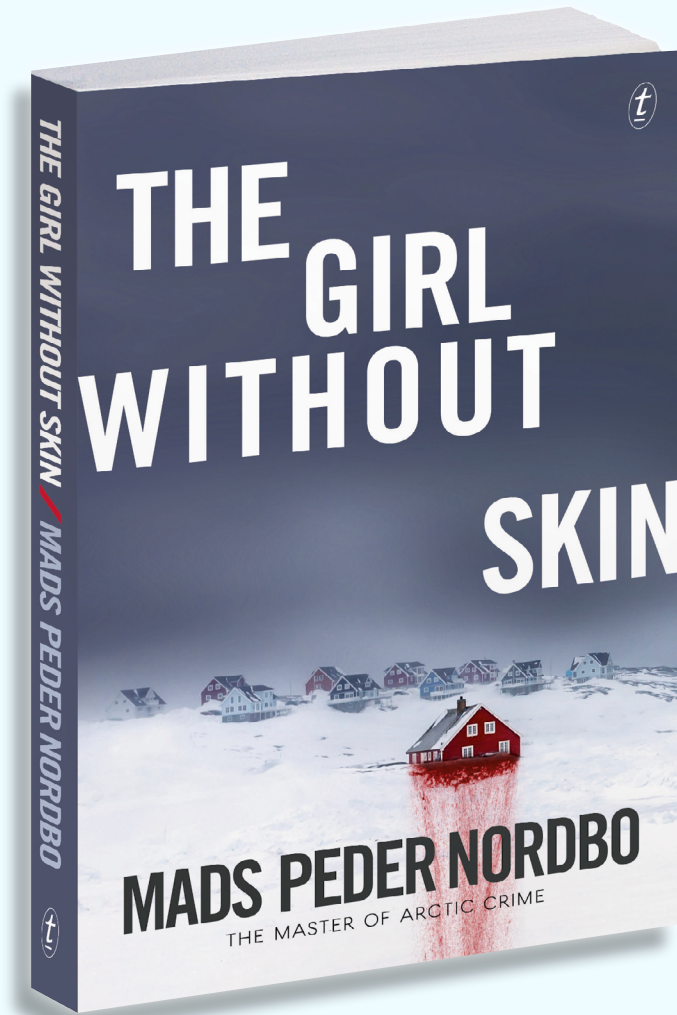
Ottesen jumped out and immediately signalled for the helicopter to take off.

Matthew's gaze settled on the small camp. He turned to the three archaeologists. 'Did you move the mummy yesterday?'

One of them shook his head. 'No.'

'It's gone now,' Matthew said, turning his face back to the cold

glass. The red spot underneath them grew smaller and smaller. Aqqalu lay gutted in the middle of it, and Ottesen was kneeling close to him on the red crystals, which only yesterday had been Aqqalu's warm blood.



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