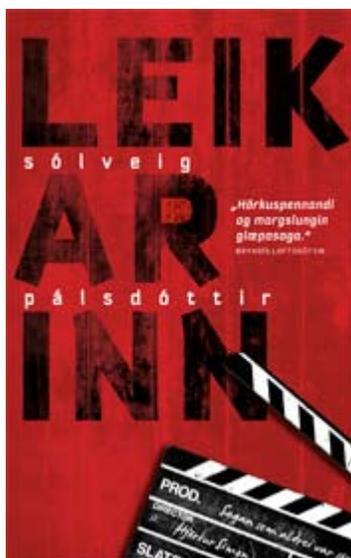


Forlagid Publishing
ua@forlagid.is; vala@forlagid.is
www.forlagid.is

CRIME NOVEL
2012

THE ACTOR

by Solveig Palsdottir



They waited in complete silence and Alda could feel the tension growing in the room. Why didn't the man begin? Why didn't he say his piece? She looked fixedly at him. He turned slowly, his eyes flickering from one place to another. Their eyes met for an instant. Then she saw it. The anguish.

During the shooting of the final scene in a movie, the main star, one of the country's most admired actors, drops down and dies in front of the photography team on the set who are unable to prevent it. One of the people present is Alda, the props manager, who has a colourful past.

The life of the actor, however, seems to have been beyond reproach – no disorder, no enemies ... When his death turns out to be murder, the police initiate a complicated investigation – but the bewitching Alda is never far off, curious about everything and everyone.

The Actor is an extremely lively and powerful bestseller, with a fast-moving plot and vivid characters.



Film rights sold to The Icelandic Film Company.

Alda, the vivid main character of **The Actor**, by actress and writer Solveig Palsdottir (b.1959), captured the imagination of filmmaker Julius Kemp. Palsdottir made good use of her intimate knowledge of movie making and theaters for the novel, which takes place when a lead actor is murdered during a film shoot.



Solveig Palsdottir (b.1959) studied at the Drama Academy of Iceland and has a BA degree in literary studies from the University of Iceland. She has acted in several productions at the National Theatre of Iceland and with independent theatre groups, besides participating in radio and television plays, in dubbing and other jobs related to the stage. Finally she has considerable experience in creating programmes for radio.

Since 1996 Palsdottir has dedicated herself to teaching in secondary school. In recent years she has flirted with drama again, acting in short films and popular television series. **The Actor** is her first book.

For further information please contact:

**Forlagid Publishing, Braedraborgarstigur 7, 101 Reykjavik, Iceland.
ua@forlagid.is, vala@forlagid.is, www.forlagid.is**

MEDIA REVIEWS

★ ★ ★ ★ (4 stars)

“Devotees of Icelandic crime fiction will welcome the emergence of a new face.”

FRETTATIMINN WEEKLY, PALL BALDVIN BALDVINSSON

“An Icelandic psychological thriller of the first order!”

THORKATLA ADALSTEINSDOTTIR, PSYCHOLOGIST

“Victims are easier to silence than family secrets. An exhilarating and complex crime novel.”

BRYNDIS LOFTSDOTTIR, BOOKSELLER

“This is one of those books that the reader just doesn’t want to put down. I finished it in a single sitting. An exceptional début.”

VIKAN, WEEKLY MAGAZINE, GUDRIDUR HARALDSDOTTIR

★ ★ ★ (3 stars)

“It is always a matter for celebration when a new author emerges as fully formed as Solveig Palsdottir in this crime thriller.

The plot of **The Actor** centres around the death of one of the country’s favourite actors. He collapses during the filming of the final scene of a movie and the crew can do nothing to help him. It is discovered that the actor’s death is not of natural causes. This sets off a gripping chain of events in which various things from the actor’s family history come to light that appear to be connected with his death. One of the principal characters in the story and a key witness to the events is Alda, a young woman who has been working as props manager on the film. Alda is an engaging character, strong, sensible and down-to-earth. She immediately gets the reader on her side, as well as the detectives Gudgeir and Andres – a pair of traditional Icelandic coppers who it would be fun to hear more of in the future.

Solveig has a fine eye for character: the people who inhabit the book, both major and minor, are thoroughly convincing, people you feel you are likely to meet in the world around you. Solveig writes with a light and pleasing touch that carries the reader along page after page.

The plot is well constructed and satisfyingly original for this kind of formula thriller. ... a well-made crime story that kept me on the edge of my seat all the way to the final page.

It is always a pleasure to welcome a new and fresh face to the ranks of Icelandic crime writers and no one who reads this first book of Solveig Palsdottir's will have reason to feel short-changed."

MORGUNBLADID DAILY, INGVELDUR GEIRSDOTTIR

THE ACTOR

By Solveig Palsdottir

CHAPTER ONE

Alda took fast hold of the handle to make sure that the door was securely locked. She put down the coffee cup beside the washbasin and then let herself slide down the door until she was sitting legs flat on the old-fashioned mosaic tiles in the narrow, enclosed space. She focussed on trying to get herself into balance. Letting the tension and irritation flow out of her. This was nothing. Nothing she couldn't handle.

'I just can't stand this forever waiting,' she said out loud to herself with a heavy sigh. 'These endless bloody hold-ups that always go with filmmaking.'

She stretched out her jean-clad legs that rested either side of the toilet bowl. She turned her toes inwards and let the tips of her soft sneakers touch the hard porcelain. Other than all the tiresome hanging about she really liked her job. Far better than any other job she'd ever done in her life. She had never stuck at anything anything like so long.

The blurred outline of some person could be seen walking briskly past the window. Alda sprang to her feet and drew the curtain better so that nobody could see in. Her fingers played with the material and

her thoughts stopped on the finely-made crocheted border. Beautiful crochet-work that would definitely come out well on film. She giggled at herself a little. Her mind just couldn't get away from work, constantly searching for something that would look just right with the set she had to work with. She could even forget herself over a toilet curtain!

Her career in props went back many years. The jobs had been many and various. She had dealt with shorts, one-off programmes, even serials and full-length feature films. The work on this film had taken longer than anything else she had been involved with and it was now, finally, coming to an end. She considered whether this was a good or bad thing, and couldn't decide.

She eased her stiff shoulders by swinging them round a few times and breathed in deeply down to her stomach. She turned on the tap and splashed water over her face. Then screwed her eyes tight shut, then opened them wide, and looked at herself in the mirror. The large, almond-shaped, deep blue eyes sparkled as a feeling of perfect equilibrium streamed through her veins.

'Alda, you're doing fine! Just don't let anybody see any irritation or negativity in you,' she convinced herself. Not one single person had seen or should see the least trace of impatience in her. Not even in the very longest sessions, nor in the ever-repeated and endless waiting. And not even just now, at lunch, when she had mentioned her son's name to Larus, the star of the film, and he had affected not to remember anything about him. As if it was possible to forget a young lad who had been in the same play as him the whole winter at the National Theatre. Even if Darri had only come on stage just before the interval and gone home after that, Larus still should have remembered him. For a tiny second sparks had flitted through her nervous system but she had managed to not to let anything show. These actors could sometimes so appallingly pompous, especially the old ones. Silly old sod, who did he think he was anyway? She rubbed her face hard

and the coarse towel scratched her delicate skin, so she threw it down in disgust. Patience had never been her strong point.

Alda opened her bright-coloured vanity bag and dug out the black mascara with the extra bristles. Her mother and father ought to see how together she had become, how she let nothing ruffle her. She gave herself a broad smile as she applied the colour to her long eye-lashes. If they just knew! Alda took a step back from the mirror, almost falling over the toilet. She stepped up onto it and considered the reflection of her body. Then she twisted round as far as possible on the little toilet seat. Things were pretty much OK, allowing for several weeks of hard slog on location with minimal comfort and a somewhat unhealthy diet. She was fortunate she had such a good physique. If she put on weight, the kilos distributed themselves evenly about her body. Better than getting it all on the bum and the thighs, like poor old Brynja in make-up. There was a creak from the wall-hung toilet under her weight but she pretended not to hear it. Actually, it tended to collect a bit more around her stomach than in other places, she thought. She heard the creaking sound again, as if the toilet was about to come loose from the wall. Oh well, this was nothing to get worked up about. Hardly more than a couple of kilos, she consoled herself as she stepped back down to the floor.

This was the last day of filming and she had started looking forward to being back home, going to the gym and seeing her son – getting back into the normal swing of things. Alda watched herself running her fingers through her thick, blond hair, whose dark roots were by now showing through clearly, then dived once again into the vanity bag and fished up the new lip gloss that Brynja had given her. The subdued pink went unbelievably well with her complexion. She pursed her lips and gave a kiss in the direction of the mirror. She picked up the beautiful powder compact she had inherited from her mother and that her grandmother had sworn was genuine ivory. Her index finger ran lovingly over the lid.

‘Alda!’

She gave a start.

‘Alda! Where the hell is Alda?’ someone was heard calling.

‘Has anyone seen Alda? She should be on set!’

Hjortur Simon the director was clearly up and doing, which meant that the others had been looking for her. What on earth was she thinking of? Everything would doubtless have been set up for the next take long since and she should be getting the set sorted – or, more precisely, should have done it already! She had been late yesterday as well. What on earth was up with her? Was she trying to see to it that she wouldn’t be getting any more work in the foreseeable future? Jobs did not exactly grow on trees these days, let alone jobs in filmmaking. She took a deep breath and reminded herself to keep a better eye on what was going on.

‘Just coming,’ she called through the closed door and hurried to get finished. Then she washed her hands carefully and grabbed her stuff before opening the door to the corridor.

‘Sorry, sorry,’ she whispered to the people she ran into on the way to the set. ‘I just lost track of time.’

She hurried into the wood-panelled living room to get things sorted out for the take. For two weeks now they had been working in this elegant old timber-frame house that had originally been built for a famous county sheriff from national history. The current owners, a hearty couple in their thirties, had been only too happy to let the house to Odin Films and make off with their two children. They had waved cheerfully as they drove off from the front of the house in a big, black 4x4 with a caravan of the smaller type in tow – in the confident knowledge that their house was in safe hands and would be in an equally good state, if not better, when they returned.

‘It’s not everybody that gets paid for going on holiday, with a newly-painted living room thrown in as an added bonus,’ they had said one after another, chuckling away like little kids.

Alda had found them pathetic, so overbearingly positive in their neat fleece jackets and outdoor trousers, but at the same time felt a painful stab of envy in her heart. They seemed so relaxed and sure of themselves, maybe even owned the chav wagon cash-down and all paid up. What a bummer to be past thirty and not even own your own flat! Then she reminded herself not to be so hard on herself. Life wasn't cheap as a single mother and on top of that in insecure work, but that was what she wanted much rather than finishing up stuck in some boring routine.

So where *is* that box with the tea set? Hopefully all still in one piece, she thought, casting her eye uneasily around the room. Someone had moved it and put it behind the sofa. In it was the tea set that Alda had borrowed from an elderly woman who lived near the Laugardalur Par in town. It was English and really quite extraordinarily beautiful. The eggshell-thin porcelain was presumably hideously expensive but even so the woman had been as if half relieved to part with it. She seemed to look on it as a personal honour that her best crockery would be immortalised in film, Alda had told her colleagues with a laugh. The immortal tea set had thus become the object of all kinds of silly jokes. After a long day's filming just about anything was funny.

If something gets broken out of that set it will be a hell of a business finding a replacement, she thought to herself. Then she shrugged her shoulders. She'd get it sorted somehow. Alda felt a surge of pride in her own abilities. She was good at this. She always managed to find the right things, whatever the scene. This was the challenge and one of the funnest things about the job. Not least when she had to track down articles from some particular period. She would immerse herself in research, get hold of accurate descriptions and then set about filling in the details of the picture she had formed in her mind to achieve the right ambience. The search for things she needed for every job like this took her to the unlikeliest places.

'I'll be there in a tick,' she announced and, to her relief, saw that

both the sound and camera crew had started using the wait to get certain technical details sorted out.

As always, Alda did her work swiftly and soundlessly. That was how the embroidered cushions were supposed to be on the sofa, with the best one at the front. She hung the landscape painting on the wall and arranged the vase of flowers on the shelf beside the sofa. Before placing *The Poetical Works of Einar Benediktsson* on the table she spread the tablecloth that they had both agreed needed to be on the table. The woman had said that the two of them, the tea set and the tablecloth, had to go together and Alda had simply thanked her gratefully as the cloth was incredibly beautifully. In fact, there was a date sewn into it on one side, but she took care to lay it on the table so that only the embroidery would show in the film and not the date.

If they happened to decide to widen the shot she intended to add in an ornamental standard lamp with a large shade that fitted absolutely with the mood. Only she would need to talk it over with the lighting director first.

There was only one actor in the final scene. As good luck would have it, his scenes formed not just the beginning and end of the film, which in the working script was titled *The Story That Was Never Told*, but also marked the beginning and end of the actual filming. This was a fairly rare thing in filmmaking and they all felt as if it must have some deeper meaning.

Larus Thorarinnsson, national treasure, entered the room. Alda smiled at him and they exchanged a few words before the call came for rehearsal. She could feel, in every cell of her body, how his powerful presence radiated out to fill every nook and cranny of her being, exactly as she had always felt when he appeared on stage at the National Theatre when she was small. He carried with him an inexplicable magic. Alda observed Larus with interest as the sound man

connected him up. Brynja Greasepaint applied some powder to his face and added a little colour to his lips with a brush.

They didn't need much rehearsal until the director was satisfied.

'Everything ready for filming. Sound rolling. Camera rolling,' called the assistant director. Larus turned his profile to the camera. This was a real professional at work, no getting away from it. Despite having spent just about all his life on the stage, he had it to a T in front of the cameras. His movements were honed to perfection and imbued the moment with a significance that had to come across to the audience, she felt.

He is beautiful, thought Alda, marvelling at how well he was ageing. She found that the resentment she'd felt towards him at lunch time had completely evaporated.

The assistant director moved in front of the camera and called, 'OK, everybody. Action,' as he snapped the clapperboard together.

The actor took a sip from the coffee and then put the cup back down again. He picked the volume of poetry up off the table and then went to the window and looked out.

'Cut!' shouted the director and took a few steps in Larus's direction, before adding in a lower tone: 'Larus, let's take it from the beginning again. That's exactly how I want it, except I'd like to ask you to take just a slightly longer time picking the book up off the table so we can get a better shot of it in frame.'

With well-practised precision, the actor was immediately back in his starting position. The assistant director went through the routine again. Clap! Take 2.

Larus took a sip of the coffee, put down the cup, and picked up the book from the table – only this time more deliberately than before. Then he went to the window and looked out. He appeared to be slightly bewildered, as, instead of contemplating the view and then opening the book as intended, he stared motionless out of the win-

dow. The camera whirred in the silence, the director knit his eyebrows. Everyone was on tenterhooks, waiting for the single sentence that made up the scene. 'The heart can turn at a single slur, Tread cautiously when the soul is at hand.' After this, the camera was supposed to close in on Larus's profile as he looked back out over the village.

Eventually he looked down at the book and then back out of the window. Now for the final line, only I bet even better this time than in the run-through before the shoot, thought Alda. She worshipped this voice that had rung so often in her ears, deep and resonant, even without having to force it in any way. Never too much, never too little, and the cadences somehow always so exactly spot on.

They waited in absolute silence and Alda felt the tension in the room mounting. Why didn't the man begin? Why wasn't he coming out with his one single line? She looked fixedly at him. He turned round slowly and his gaze flickered slightly from place to place. For a second their eyes met.

Then she saw it. The anguish. He tottered and looked at them one after another in his despair. Instead of the beautiful line of poetry, the only sound was a hoarse rattle, almost inhuman.

Larus stiffened. Then it was as if he lost control over his body. This magnificent man sank down to his knees before the eyes of the film crew that stood as if paralysed, as if they couldn't understand whether this was real or in play.

From Larus's throat could be heard a rasping, suffocated whine. Despair, mixed with disbelief, shone out of the dim-blue eyes. Then he collapsed to the floor. The body that had previously been so dignified and majestic now lay a shapeless mass on the floor in front of them. He twitched violently a few times in repeated spasms that little by little died away. Then all went quiet.

A blood-tinted foam trickled from the corners of his mouth and out onto his cheek, which had gone a strange grey-blue colour in spite of the make-up.

CHAPTER TWO

Alda lit herself a cigarette and felt herself go woozy with the smoke. She was supposed to have stopped smoking but had cadged a cigarette from Saevar the film's 'general fixer'. No sooner said than there was one between her lips and she was hungrily drawing the smoke into her lungs, having got a light from Saevar, who was plainly only too happy to have someone with him outside on the backdoor steps for a smoke. The platform hardly had space for the gangling man and Alda squeezed herself in somehow beside him up against the handrail. That was as far as they were allowed to go: they had been forbidden to leave the house before the police had spoken with them.

Now she was waiting to be called into the room that the police had commandeered. Alda had been put last in line because when it had come to her she had broken down and burst into floods of tears. All of a sudden an idea struck her, that they wanted to speak to her last because she had been crying. That they thought there was something strange about this.

Alda stuck her index finger into her mouth and then stroked it carefully under her eyes to remove the smudges that had leaked down with the tears. The make-up she had taken so much care over just a short while ago was bound to be all messed up. These policeman obviously had no idea how much Larus meant to her. He had been a big part of her childhood and she had been so happy finally to get to work beside him, if only for a short time. Her parents had seen to it that she saw just about everything that was shown at the National Theatre from the time she'd been able to sit still for more than a minute. She was allowed to see grown-up productions – if not too grown-up – her mother had said and winked at her father. They

had been so wonderfully old-fashioned and conservative. That winter there had been a performance in which two actors spent a lot of time on stage completely naked and opera glasses could be ordered in advance through the box office.

The trips to the fairy palace down in town were the best, best, best, thought Alda, because then she could forget all this boring stuff that belonged to reality. When the lights went down in the auditorium, and the coughing started, and the curtain drew back and the spot-lights lit up the stage, she disappeared to herself. It was just about the same, whatever play it was. She drank in every word, every movement, blissful and secure between mum and dad, chomping on a liquorice that had been put into a bag that didn't rustle. They quickly realised just how much these theatre trips meant to her and after that she got tickets as rewards for good behaviour. As a result she had seen some shows more than once, was quick to see that it was in her best interests to be well-behaved, that it produced results.

No, this was something it just wasn't possible to explain. Least of all to the police. Alda tore herself away from her memories and tried as best she could to keep up a broken conversation with Saevar, but gave up and stubbed out the half-smoked cigarette on the black-gloss handrail, opened the back door and wandered into the toilet. For the second time that day she looked herself eye to eye in the mirror. Then she leant over the sink and splashed her face with cold water again and again to liven herself up. Unconsciously she shook her head as she made a firm resolution not to accept the post-traumatic stress counselling that was doubtless on its way. Had no time for this kind of idiot psycho-mumbo-jumbo.

When she came back out again she saw her colleagues standing up along the wall of the hallway or sitting in the few chairs that were available. Some were silent, others talking in hushed tones with a serious expression on their faces. Brynja Greasepaint's fire-red and close-cropped barnet was the only thing that brought any cheer to the

scene, but when she turned round Alda saw that her eyes were as red as everyone else's.

'Oh, what a mess,' she muttered dejectedly.

'Have they taken him away?' whispered Alda, putting her arm around her friend's shoulders.

'No, not yet. The doctor's still in there and there are people from forensics on the way. And they're going to investigate the kitchen. Whatever, no one's going to be allowed out for the time being. The police are going to talk to everybody, every single one of us. They're in there.'

Brynja motioned towards one of the rooms.

'Yes, I know,' Alda carried on whispering. 'It's just... I don't get this with Larus. He seemed so full of life. Could he have had a heart attack? Or some gigantic epileptic fit? Those convulsions might point that way.'

'No, I just heard that he...' Brynja wetted her lips.

'What?'

'That Larus, I mean the body, showed signs of poisoning.'

'He ate with us at lunchtime!' said Alda, louder than she intended. 'I stood in front of him in the queue and took exactly the same as him. At least, I think so.'

She shuddered and crossed her arms.

'Oh fuck,' Brynja gasped, shifting herself involuntarily away from Alda as if she was carrying some highly infectious disease. They looked more seriously at each other without saying any more.

A great heaviness flooded over Alda. She was suffused by a sense of loneliness. She missed her son. She had not seen Darri since her short weekend break two weeks ago. God in heaven, what on earth was she thinking of, being away from him so much? She took a sip of the lukewarm, milky coffee someone had handed her and the taste suddenly made her feel nauseous.

'No, it can hardly be they think it's food poisoning. If they did

they'd certainly have started taking blood samples from us, I'd have thought,' said Brynja, with a heaviness in her voice. The dangling earrings she almost never took out of her ears shook vehemently as if to underline what she was saying.

Alda shrugged her shoulders distractedly as she sidled out into the corridor to find her phone to call Darri. Suddenly she could not wait to get away from this oppressive atmosphere.

CHAPTER THREE

'Full name?'

'Alda Ingthorsdottir.'

'Age?'

'Thirty-five.'

'Occupation?'

'I see to the props.'

'Props?'

'Stage property. Furnishings. That kind of thing,' she explained.

Yet another extraordinary job title, and yet another person working on this film. Gudgeir Fransson used his middle finger to adjust his new varifocal glasses on his nose without taking his eyes off the woman who was sitting in front of the blue and white desk. He gingerly stretched out his right leg a couple of times, as inconspicuously as possible. His knee was troubling him even though he was sitting in a decent chair. A pang of pain shot through it with the movement.

'It seems to need an incredible number of people to make a single film,' he said without thinking.

Alda looked at him questioningly, plainly uncertain whether this was a question or a statement.

'Yes, you wouldn't believe how many,' she said before Gudgeir

managed to continue. 'Are you one of those people that rush out of the cinema as soon as the picture's finished and never see the credits scrolling down the screen? It makes your trip to the cinema last ages longer if you do, I can tell you.'

The smile disappeared from his face, then returned almost at once.

'Have you been working for Odin Films long, Alda?'

'I... well, that's not really how it works. You get taken on for a particular job. I've done a few for them.'

She fiddled with her thick hair, twisting a strand of it into a circle round her finger.

Gudgeir stretched out his long frame as he sized up the woman who was sitting on the other side of the desk. Blonde, or so it appeared. Women's hair colour was one of the imponderables of modern life. A nice-looking woman... Yes, incredibly nice-looking, truth to tell, but even so she came across as a bit messy. Maybe that was the style with these film people? At least it was clear that she didn't need to take much trouble about doing herself up and for the most part she still seemed to get away with it.

Over the next minutes he listened patiently as she went conscientiously over every single thing that had happened from when Larus had arrived on set in his car from Reykjavik that morning. The actor had declined an offer to be picked up, saying he would enjoy driving himself this time. It would be so peaceful in the early morning, plus he would get the wonderful views of the mountains. And rolling along easily in the car on his own he would have a welcome opportunity to prepare himself spiritually for the shoot.

Alda went in detail over everything that had happened that day, to the best of her memory, she added, and Gudgeir was well impressed by how precise she was. She had spoken very little to Larus, except right before the filming. Oh yes, and also just briefly while they were waiting in the queue for lunch. She had told him how impressed she'd been with him in *Iceland's Bell* but had been determined not to get

carried away like some kind of star-struck devotee. It would come across as so incredibly uncool, listing up all the roles she had seen him in, she explained. No, instead she had started talking about the salad.

Alda put her hand in front of her mouth as if she thought she'd already said enough.

'The salad?'

Yes, she'd gone on a bit about what a nice change it was that there was salad on the menu today. Healthy food had been in short supply since they had started shooting out here in this back end of beyond. Very limited selection in the only shop in the place. If you didn't count the filling station, she had added, if she remembered the conversation right: the only vegetable there was the French fries!

Despite the facetiousness, Gudgeir could see a shiver running through Alda at the thought of this meaningless blather with a man for whom she had clearly felt a great respect. She was visibly coming to the realisation as they spoke that she had been one of the last people he had spoken to in this world.

'I've wanted to talk to Larus so often, ask him about the parts he's been in and so on... He was my favourite actor... and there was me just jabbering on about some salad like an idiot,' she said, in a struggle with the corners of her mouth that seemed about to give way to tears.

Gudgeir had trouble keeping a straight face at this unexpected turn in the conversation but took care to show nothing but proper concern.

'Didn't you talk about anything else?' He looked steadily at her through the glasses with his dark-brown eyes.

'No.'

He felt that his gaze was making her feel insecure and saw how she hesitated a moment before answering.

'Well, actually, I just mentioned my boy to him. Darri, my son.'

He's twelve. Had a walk-on part in a play at the National Theatre last winter. Larus was in the lead role.'

'That must have been quite an adventure for your son!' Gudgeir smiled encouragingly at Alda, gripping his sore knee between his thumb and middle finger and massaging it carefully.

'Larus didn't remember him. Superstars like that don't really notice the extras,' she said slightly pettishly, again taking a lock of her hair and starting to wind it round her finger with some force. Gudgeir took off his new varifocals and screwed up his eyes. He was feeling a little dizzy and so put them away in the case that lay on the desk in front of him.

'Can you think of anything that was in any way different today from other days?'

'No two days are ever the same in filmmaking,' she explained, but said she hadn't noticed anything unusual in that way. Everything had been as it usually was before filming.

'Are you quite sure? Have a good think about it, Alda,' said Gudgeir.

She was silent and seemed to be going over the events in her mind.

'Just take your time,' he added, taking a look over his shoulder to where his colleagues, Saeros and Andres, were sitting, listening in on what was going on. As if involuntarily, he compared the two women. They could hardly have been more different.

His colleague Saeros, dark-haired and sharp-featured, sat stiff and upright in her chair, dressed in a dark-blue trouser suit and a white blouse. She had clearly ironed her clothes with the same meticulousness as on every other day of the year. Her hair looked, as ever, as if she had just emerged from a hairdresser's. Still, Gudgeir was aware that Saeros ran and swam several kilometres every morning without fail and he admired her resolution. He knew for a fact that nothing that had gone on during the questioning would have escaped her notice, not one single tiny detail that might possibly be of any impor-

tance to the investigation. Saeros was razor-sharp, rigorous and drove herself hard. She had finished the first two years of a law degree while working full time, as well as helping to support her brothers and sisters – her family affairs were rich and colourful, Gudgeir had heard. The strain of trying to cope with both study and work a hundred percent had eventually become too much and she had shelved the studies for the time being. But her boss had no doubt that she would go back to them again later, when things were easier.

There was certainly no little hideaway for ironed blouses and trim-cut suits in the wardrobe of Alda the props girl. Her dress sense was rather more original, a bit here, there and everywhere, but somehow with something captivating about it. The fair hair tumbled down to her shoulders in curls and waves, as if it was pure chance how it fell. However, Gudgeir had a feeling that this was not how it was. He ran his hand through his own hair, which had started going grey at the sides, which was all the more conspicuous in hair as dark as his. He then glanced towards Andres who, between following what was going on with Alda, had his mind on the recording machine that hummed beside him, taking care that nothing went awry there. Andres was promising material, in Gudgeir's estimation, easy to have around and generally relaxed and cheerful. A little under medium height, with hair thinner than his age would make you think. Even though it was a warm summer's day he had not taken off his moss-green bomber jacket any more than he ever did. A few days back Gudgeir had heard Saeros ask Andres whether he slept in his jacket. Not the first time our sharp-featured friend's hit the nail uncomfortably on the head, thought Gudgeir, and certainly won't to be the last. Most of Saeros's faults were equally her strengths.

He turned his attention back to the young woman who was sitting opposite him and who shook her head when she again met the questioning expression in his eyes.

'Go back carefully in your mind over everything that happened

this morning. If anything occurs to you, however small, tell us about it,' he said amiably.

'I don't think I can help you any more,' answered Alda apologetically, though still looking resolutely into Gudgeir's dark eyes, which were looking back attentively at her. Her big eyes were bright and their colour peculiarly blue.

'Did you know the deceased personally at all?'

'No, not at all really. I saw him a few times when Darri was in the play, of course, but I never spoke to him directly.'

'OK,' said Gudgeir. 'What happened today was very unpleasant, understandably, and it's quite natural that it was deeply distressing for those of you who were here. But I gather that you took it particularly close to heart.'

Alda stared at him and her eyes filled with tears. For a second Gudgeir felt at a loss.

'What on earth are you driving at? Of course it's a shock when someone dies like that directly in front of you. I didn't know Larus personally but I've admired him as an actor for as long back as I can remember. He had such a charisma about him and he meant a lot to me. I've followed him since I was a kid and so this was...' She searched for words, constantly winding a lock of her hair round her finger. 'I mean, I've never seen someone die before and this... It all happened so suddenly.'

She went quiet again and found herself a new strand of hair to twist before she went on. 'We were in the middle of the take and all of a sudden Larus just sank down, as you must have heard a hundred times already. Sort of really creepy,' blurted out of her. There was a tone of suppressed irritability in her voice, as if she was explaining something to a child rather than to a senior policeman.

'I can understand that,' said Gudgeir, and his mind went back to some pictures he had seen of Larus in the playbill cases outside the National Theatre last winter and the enormous posters of him in some

role that had be plastered over the city's bus shelters. 'Would you mind coming into the living room with us and showing us where you were standing when it happened?'

He stood up and, gently touching Alda's bare arm, steered her courteously but purposefully out of the room and into the corridor. The skin was soft as silk.

Translation: Nicholas Jones