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I Remember You

A Ghost Story

Yrsa Sigurdardóttir

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A GHOST STORY

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Translated from the Icelandic
by Philip Roughton



MINOTAUR BOOKS

A THOMAS DUNNE BOOK

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Also by Yrsa Sigurdardóttir

Ashes to Dust By Yrsa Sigurdardóttir

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Copyright

Chapter 1

The waves rolled the boat to and fro in a constantly changing rhythm. The prow bobbed gently up and down as sharper movements shook the vessel, rocking it fiercely from side to side. The skipper struggled to fasten the little boat to a narrow steel post, but the weathered floating dock kept retreating, as if it were part of a game. He patiently repeated the same movements over and over, pulling the frayed rope in the direction of the post, but each time the coarse loop was about to fall in place, it seemed to be yanked away. It was as though the sea were playing with them, showing them who was in charge. In the end the man managed to secure the boat, but it was unclear whether the waves had grown bored of teasing him or whether the captain's experience and patience had got the better of them. He turned to the three passengers, his expression serious, and said: "There you go, but be careful stepping up." Then he jerked his chin at the boxes, bags and other things that they'd brought with them. "I'll help you move this off the boat, but I can't help you take it to the houses unfortunately." He squinted at the surface of the sea. "It looks like I'd better get back as quick as I can. You'll have time to sort all this stuff out once I'm gone. There should be a wheelbarrow around here somewhere."

"No problem." Garðar smiled faintly at the man but made no move to start unloading the boat. He shuffled his feet and exhaled loudly, then turned his gaze inland, where several houses were visible above the line of the beach. Further away several roofs glinted. Although it was early afternoon, the faint winter light was fading quickly. It wouldn't be long before it was completely dark. "This place isn't exactly buzzing with life," he said, with false cheer.

"Well, no. Were you expecting it to?" The skipper didn't hide his surprise. "I thought you'd been here before. You might want to reconsider your plan. You're welcome to come back with me; free of charge, of course."

Garðar shook his head, studiously avoiding looking at Katrín, who was trying to make eye contact with him so she could nod, or indicate in some other way that she really didn't mind going back. She had never been as excited as him about this adventure, though neither had she opposed it outright. Instead she'd gone along with it, letting herself be carried along by his enthusiasm and his certainty that everything would all go according to plan, but now that he seemed to be wavering, her own confidence in it had ebbed away. Suddenly she felt quite sure that total failure was the best they could hope for, but chose not to imagine the worst-case scenario. She glanced at Líf, who was supporting herself on the gunwale, trying to regain the balance she'd left behind on the pier in Ísafjörður. After battling seasickness for most of the voyage, Líf looked utterly wretched, bearing only a passing resemblance to the perky woman who'd been so keen to come with them that she'd ignored Katrín's words of caution. Even Garðar didn't seem himself; as they'd drawn closer to shore, the bravado he'd shown as they'd prepared for the trip had faded. Of course, Katrín could hardly talk; she was sitting on a sack

firewood, doggedly refusing to stand up. The only difference between her and the other two was that she'd never been looking forward to the trip. The only passenger who seemed excited to disembark was Putti, Líf's little dog, who—in defiance of all their assumptions to the contrary—had turned out to have excellent sea legs.

Apart from the lapping of the waves, the silence was absolute. How had she ever imagined this could work? The three of them, all alone in the dead of winter in a deserted village way up north in the middle of nowhere, without electricity or heat, and the only way back by sea. If something happened they had no one to rely on but themselves. And now that Katrín was facing the facts she admitted to herself that their resourcefulness was decidedly limited. None of them was particularly outdoorsy, and almost any other task you could name would suit them better than renovating old houses. She opened her mouth to make the decision for them and accept the captain's offer, but then shut it without saying a word, sighing quietly to herself. The moment had passed, there was no going back, and it was far too late to protest now. She had no one to blame but herself for getting involved in this nonsense, because she'd let numerous opportunities to raise objections or change direction go by. At any point since the house project had first been raised she could have suggested that they decline the offer to buy a share in it, for example, or that the renovations could wait until summer, when there was a regular ferry schedule. Katrín suddenly felt a cold breeze and pulled the zip of her jacket higher. This whole thing was ridiculous.

But what if it wasn't really her passivity that was to blame, but the eagerness of Einar, now deceased, who'd been Garðar's best friend and Líf's husband? It was hard to be angry with him now when he was six-feet under; nonetheless it seemed clear to Katrín that he bore the greater responsibility for this absurd situation. Einar had hiked in Hornstrandir two summers ago and so was familiar with Hesteyri, where the house was located. He had spun them the story of a village at the end of the world, beauty and peace and endless hiking trails in an unforgettable setting. Garðar had been inspired—not by the lure of nature, but by the fact that Einar hadn't been able to rent a room in Hesteyri, since the only guesthouse there had been full. Katrín couldn't remember which of them had gone on to suggest they see if any of the other houses there were for sale and transform one into a guesthouse, but it didn't matter; once the idea had been mooted there was no going back. Garðar had been unemployed for eight months and he was completely gripped by the idea of finally doing something useful. It was hardly going to dampen his interest when Einar expressed a keen desire to take part, offering to contribute both labor and capital. Then Líf had stoked the fire with extravagant praise for the brilliance of the idea and characteristically effusive encouragement. Katrín remembered now how much Líf's eagerness had got on her nerves; she'd suspected it was partly motivated by the prospect of time apart from her husband, as the renovations would require him to spend long periods of time up north. At that time their marriage had appeared to be falling apart, but when Einar died Líf's grief had seemed bottomless. An ugly thought stirred in Katrín's mind: it would have been better if Einar had died before the purchase of the house had been completed. But unfortunately that wasn't how it had happened: now they were stuck with the property, and only one man excited about the renovation project where there had been two. The fact that Líf was so keen to take on her husband's role and press on with the repairs probably had something to do with the grieving process; she had neither skill nor interest in that kind of work, that much was certain. If she'd wanted to pull out, the house would have gone back on the market and they'd probably be sitting at home watching TV now in the comforting arms of the city where night was never as black as here in Hesteyri.

When it became clear that the project hadn't died with Einar, Líf and Garðar had gone west on a weekend and sailed from Ísafjörður to Hesteyri to take a look at the house. It had certainly been in poor condition, but that did nothing to diminish Garðar and Líf's excitement. They returned with a large pile of photographs of every nook and cranny of the house and Garðar went straight to work planning what needed to be done before the start of the tourist season. From the photos, Katrín would have seen that the house was held together by its paint, despite Garðar's insistence that the previous owner had carried out all the major repairs needed. For her part, Líf added flowery descriptions of Hesteyri's incredible natural beauty. Before long, Garðar was making in-depth calculations, raising the price for an overnight stay and increasing the number of guests that could fit into the little two-story house every time he opened his Excel spreadsheet. At least it would be interesting to see the place with his own eyes and work out how exactly Garðar intended to accommodate all these people.

Katrín got to her feet, but couldn't see the house from where she stood on deck. From one of the panoramic shots that Garðar had taken of the area it had looked as if it was located at the edge of the settlement, but rather high up, so it should be visible. What if it had simply collapsed after Garðar and Líf had been on their reconnaissance trip? Nearly two months had passed since then, and the area was subject to no small amount of foul weather. She was about to suggest that they verify this before the boat sailed away when the skipper, doubtless starting to worry that he might have to carry them off the boat, said: "Well, at least you're lucky with the weather." He looked up at the sky. "It could still change despite the forecast, so you should be prepared for anything."

"We are. Just look at all this stuff." Garðar smiled, a trace of his previous conviction returning to his voice. "I think the only thing we have to fear is pulled muscles."

"If you say so." The captain didn't elaborate on this, and instead lifted a box onto the pier. "I hope you have fully charged phones; if you climb up to the top of that hill you can get a connection. There's no point trying down here."

Garðar and Katrín both looked toward the hill, which seemed more like a mountain to them. Líf was still staring back at the eddying black surface of the sea. "That's good to know." Garðar patted his coat pocket. "Hopefully we won't have any need for them. We should be able to make it through the week; we'll wait for you here at the pier, like we discussed."

"Bear in mind that I can't make it out here if the weather is bad. But if that's the case, I'll come as soon as it clears up. If it's a bit rough, obviously you don't need to stand here waiting on the pier; I'll come up to the house to get you. You can't hang around here in the cold and wind." The man turned and looked over the fjord. "The forecast is fair, but a lot can change in a week. It doesn't take much to make the boat bob like a cork, so we'll have to hope it's not too rough."

"How bad does the weather have to be to stop you from coming?" Katrín tried to hide her irritation at this pronouncement. Why hadn't he told them this before they made arrangements with him? Maybe they would have hired a bigger boat. But as soon as the thought entered her mind, she realized that they wouldn't; a bigger boat would have cost far more.

"If the waves are high on the open sea it's not likely I'd attempt it." He looked back over the fjord again and nodded at the water. "I won't sail if they're much worse than this." Then he turned to face them. "I need to get going." He went to the stack of supplies on deck and passed Garðar the mattress that was lying on top. They formed an assembly line to move the boxes, paint pots, firewood, tools, and black bin bags stuffed with non-breakable items onto the floating pier. While Katrín arranged the items along the pier to keep the end of it free, Líf was allowed to rest. She was in a bad way; it was a

she could do just to hobble onto land and lie down near the top of the beach. Putti followed her jumping about on the sand, obviously delighted to have solid ground under his feet and blind to the sorry condition of his owner. It took all Katrín's strength to keep up with the men, and sometimes they were forced to jump onto the pier to help her. Finally the cargo stood in a long line on the dock, a kind of guard of honor for the visitors. The skipper started shuffling his feet impatiently. He seemed more eager than them to part company. His presence provided a sense of security that would disappear with his little boat over the horizon; unlike them, he had dealt with the forces of nature before and would be prepared for whatever might befall him. Both Garðar and Katrín flirted with the idea of asking him to stay and give them a helping hand, but neither of them expressed it. Finally the man brought things a close. "Well, all you need to do now is get ashore, and you're on your way." He directed his words at Garðar, who smiled half-heartedly, then clambered onto the floating pier. He and Katrín stood there staring down at the man with bewildered expressions. He looked away, half embarrassed.

"You'll be fine. I just hope your friend feels better." He nodded toward Líf, who was now sitting up. Her white jacket stood out sharply, a reflection of how poorly the new visitors fitted into the surroundings. "See, the poor love seems to be feeling better already." His words failed to cheer them up—if that had been his intention—and Katrín wondered how they looked to him: a couple from Reykjavík, a teacher and a graduate in business administration, both barely over thirty and neither of them cut out for any great physical exertion; not to mention the third wheel, who could barely lift her head. "I'm sure everything will be all right," the captain repeated gruffly, but without much conviction. "But you shouldn't wait too long to get your gear up to the house; it'll be dark soon."

A heavy, tangled lock of hair blew across Katrín's eyes. In all the rush not to forget anything on the list of necessary building materials and supplies, she had forgotten to bring hair bands. Líf claimed she'd only brought one with her and had had to use it during the sea crossing to keep her hair out of her face as she vomited. Katrín tried to push the hair back with her fingers, but the wind immediately ruffled it again. Garðar's hair wasn't faring much better, though it was a lot shorter than hers. Their hiking shoes looked like they'd been bought specifically for this trip, and although their windproof trousers and jackets weren't brand new, they might just as well have been—they'd been given them as wedding presents by Garðar's siblings, but this was the first time they'd had a chance to use them. Líf had bought her white ski suit for a skiing trip to Italy and it was about as appropriate to their current environment as a bathrobe. It was also clear from their pale skin that they weren't big on outdoor pursuits. At least they were all in good shape from spending hours at the gym, although Katrín suspected that whatever strength they'd managed to build up was unlikely to be sufficient for the work they'd be doing here.

"Do you know if any other visitors are expected to come here this week?" Katrín crossed her fingers behind her back. If so, there would still be hope that they could get a ride home earlier if everything went badly for them.

The skipper shook his head. "You don't know much about this place, do you?" They hadn't been able to talk much on the way due to the noise of the engine.

"No. Not really."

"No one comes here except during the summer, since there's no real reason to be here in the dead of winter. People stay in one of the houses over the New Year, and one or two house owners pop over sometimes to make sure that everything's in order, but otherwise it's empty here during the winter months." The man stopped and looked over what was visible of the settlement. "Which house was

you bought?”

“The one furthest back. I think it must have been the priest’s residence.” Garðar’s voice betrayed a hint of pride. “You actually can’t see it from here in the dark, but otherwise it’s quite prominent.”

“What? Are you sure?” The skipper looked surprised. “No priest lived in this village. When there was still a church here, it was served from Aðalvík. I think you must have been given the wrong information.” Garðar hesitated and various thoughts crossed Katrín’s mind, among them the hopeful notion that this was all a misunderstanding: there was no house, and they could turn right round and go home.

“No, I’ve had a look at it and it clearly used to be a priest’s house. At least, there’s a rather nice cross carved into the front door.”

The skipper seemed to have trouble believing Garðar. “Who else owns the house with you?” His brow had furrowed slightly; it was as if he suspected them of having come into possession of the house by some criminal means.

“No one,” replied Garðar, frowning. “We bought the house from the estate of someone who died before he could renovate it.”

The captain tugged on the rope and then jumped up to join them on the pier. “I think I’d better find out what’s going on here. I know all the houses in the village and generally each of them has several owners, usually siblings or descendants of the previous inhabitants. I don’t know of any house that could have belonged to one individual.” He wiped his palms on his trousers. “I can’t leave you here unless I can be certain that you’ve got some shelter and that you haven’t been fed a load of nonsense. He set off down the pier. “Point me to the house when we get to the top of the beach; we’ll be far enough there from the boat for its lights not to blind our view.”

He strode off and they followed, forced to take larger steps than they were used to in order to keep up with the man, who walked with a fast, loping gait that belied his short stature. Then he stopped suddenly as he’d started, and they barely avoided knocking into him: they’d come to where Líf was sitting miserably. It looked to Katrín as if the color was returning to her cheeks. “I think I’ve stopped vomiting.” She tried to smile at them, without much success. “I’m frozen. When can we get inside?”

“Soon.” Garðar was unusually curt, but then obviously regretted it, since he added in a much gentler tone: “Just try to bear up.”

He pushed Putti aside as the dog greeted their arrival by fawning over him. Irritated, he brushed sand off his trouser leg.

The skipper turned to Garðar. “Where did you say the house was? Can you see it from here?”

Katrín positioned herself next to the men and watched as anxiously as the old captain. Although Garðar’s description of the village was vivid in her mind’s eye, it was difficult to reconcile it with what she saw now. The little cluster of ten houses and their accompanying storage sheds was more spread out than she’d expected, and it struck her how much distance there was between them. She would have thought that in such an isolated community people would have wanted to live close together, to draw strength from each other in times of trouble or hardship. But what did she know? She actually had no idea how old the village was. Maybe the people there needed large gardens for keeping livestock or to plant vegetables. There could hardly be a shop there. Garðar finally spotted what he was looking for and pointed. “There, furthest out, on the other side of the stream. Of course, you can only see the roof—on the other side of the hill with the spruce trees, which block the view a bit.” He dropped his hand. “You don’t think a priest lived there?”

The old man clicked his tongue, and stared up at the innocuous-looking roof where it rose over the yellowed vegetation on the slope. “I’d forgotten that place. But no, it’s not the priest’s house. The cross on the door doesn’t have anything to do with a priest. The person who lived there was a follower of the Heavenly Father and his Son and thought it was a fitting tribute.” He pondered for a moment and appeared to be about to say something, but stopped. “For years the house has gone by the name Final Sight. It’s visible from the sea.” The man looked as if he wanted to add something, but again did not.

“Final Sight. Okay.” Garðar tried to look nonchalant but Katrín could see through him. One of the things he had found most attractive about the house was that it had once been inhabited by one of the most important figures in the village. “I guess it would have been a lot to ask to have a rectory in a place this size.” Garðar looked over the houses, most of which were fully visible from where they were standing, unlike the partially hidden one they now owned. “But weren’t there more houses here at one time? Some of them must have been torn down over the years.”

“Yes, yes, quite right.” The old man still hadn’t turned back to face them and appeared distracted. “There were more houses here. Of course there were never many people living here, but some took their houses with them when they left. Only the foundations remain.”

“Have you ever been in there? In our house?” Katrín had the feeling that something odd was going on, but that the man couldn’t express it for some reason. “Is the roof about to collapse or something like that?” She lacked the imagination to come up with anything else. “Will it be safe for us in there?”

“I haven’t been in there, but the roof is probably all right. The previous owners were quite enthusiastic at first about patching the place up. Everyone starts off well.”

“Starts off?” Garðar winked at Katrín conspiratorially and grinned. “So it’s high time someone got down to business and completed the repairs.”

The man ignored Garðar’s attempt to lighten the mood; instead he turned away from the little cluster of houses that could hardly be called a village and prepared to head back down to the pier. “I’m going to get something from the boat.” Katrín and Garðar hesitated, taken aback, not knowing whether they should wait there for him or follow; finally they decided on the latter.

“Where are you going? You’re not leaving me here alone!” Líf scrambled to her feet.

Katrín turned back toward her. “We’ll be right back. You’ve been sitting there for over half an hour, so a few minutes more won’t make a difference. Just rest.” Before Líf had a chance to object, Katrín hurried to catch up with Garðar and the skipper.

The skipper disappeared into the boat, then reappeared a moment later with an open plastic bag containing various items she couldn’t make out. From it he pulled out a key ring holding an ordinary house key, and another that was much more old-fashioned and grand-looking. “Just to be sure, take these keys to the guesthouse in the doctor’s residence.” He pointed at one of the most respectable-looking houses, clearly visible from the pier. “I’ll let the owners know I’ve loaned them to you. The woman who looks after it is my wife’s sister; she’ll probably be glad to know that you have somewhere else to go if anything should come up. You don’t need to worry about staying there.”

Something unspoken hovered in the air between Garðar and Katrín: they hadn’t told the man about their plans to create competition for the guesthouse to which they were being given the keys. Neither said anything. Katrín held out her hand and took the key ring. “Thank you.”

“You should also keep your phone batteries charged, and don’t hesitate to call if you have any trouble. In decent weather I can make it here in under two hours.”

“That’s very kind of you.” Garðar put his arm around Katrín’s shoulder. “We’re not quite as hopeless as we look, so I doubt it will come to that.”

“It’s nothing to do with you. The house doesn’t have a great reputation and although I’m not superstitious, I’ll feel better knowing that you have somewhere else to go and that you’re aware you can call for help. The weather here can be dangerous sometimes, that’s all.” When neither of them responded he wished them good luck and said good-bye. They muttered farewells in return and stood rooted to the spot, waving, as the man steered the boat carefully off the pier and sailed out into the fjord.

When they were alone, anxiety overwhelmed Katrín. “What did he mean by ‘the house doesn’t have a great reputation?’”

Garðar shook his head slowly. “No idea. I suspect he knows more about our plan than he was willing to admit. Didn’t he say his sister-in-law runs the guesthouse? He was just trying to scare us so we hope he doesn’t start spreading rumors about the house.”

Katrín said nothing. She was sure Garðar was wrong. Apart from Líf, no one knew about their plan. Neither she nor Garðar had discussed them with their families for fear of jinxing the project. It was bad enough that their families pitied them because of Garðar’s unemployment. Their relatives thought they were taking a trip out west for Katrín’s winter holiday from school. No, the old man hadn’t said what he did to scare them; there was something else behind it. Katrín sorely regretted not having pressed him for more details in order to prevent her imagination from running wild. The boat receded into the distance faster than she recalled it arriving, and in an incredibly short amount of time appeared only as big as her fist.

“It’s awfully quiet here.” Garðar broke the silence that the boat had left behind. “I don’t think I’ve ever been in such an isolated spot.” He bent down and kissed Katrín’s salty cheek. “But the company here is good, that’s for sure.”

Katrín smiled at him and asked whether he’d forgotten their Lazarus, Líf. She turned away from the sea, not wanting to see the boat disappear completely, and looked along the beach and up toward the land. Líf was on her feet, waving at them frantically. Katrín raised her hand to wave back but dropped it when she saw something move quickly behind their white-clad friend. It was a pitch-black shadow much darker than their dim surroundings. It disappeared as soon as it appeared, making it impossible for Katrín to distinguish what it was, but it looked a bit like a person, a short one. She gripped Garðar’s upper arm tightly. “What was that?”

“What?” Garðar peered toward where Katrín was pointing. “Do you mean Líf?”

“No. Something moved behind her.”

“Really?” Garðar gave her a puzzled look. “There’s nothing there. Just a seasick woman in a sailor outfit. Wasn’t it just the dog?”

Katrín tried to appear calm. It could well be that her eyes had deceived her. But it wasn’t Putti, she was certain of that; he was standing in front of Líf, sniffing the air. Maybe the wind had blown something loose. But that didn’t explain how quickly it seemed to have gone by, although there could have been a sharp gust. She let go of Garðar’s arm and focused on breathing calmly for what was left of the walk down the pier. Nor did she say anything after they’d reached Líf. There was a rustling noise and a cracking in the dry, yellowed vegetation behind them, as if someone were walking through it. Neither Garðar nor Líf seemed to notice anything, but Katrín couldn’t avoid the thought that they weren’t alone there in Hesteyri.

Chapter 2

“I don’t know who could have done this, but I doubt it was kids or teenagers. Although it’s certainly possible.” Freyr stuck his hands in his pockets and stared at the destruction in front of him once more. Tattered teddy bears and ragdolls were strewn across the floor, the limbs torn from most of them and the eyes pulled out. “My first hunch is that we have every reason to be concerned about this person or persons, although it’s difficult to make a complete diagnosis based on this mess. If it helps, I’m leaning more toward the idea that whoever did this worked alone. I’m sorry I can’t be more precise.” He stared at the yellow wall and the remnants of the drawings made by the Ísafjörður schoolchildren, which consisted only of the corners where they had been fastened to the wall with Blu-tack. The remainder of the drawings lay on the floor, torn and tattered; thick white paper covered with bright, colorful pictures. At first glance it appeared that the vandal had torn them down hastily in order to make room for his message. Upon closer inspection, it was clear that he’d taken time to tear the pictures up. Clumsy letters covered the wall. He had gone over each one repeatedly, scrawling them with violent strokes with crayons, which lay in pieces among the shredded drawings. There was no way of guessing the age of the person who had written the message on the wall, if it were in fact a message.

DIRTY.

The wall was illuminated for a moment and Freyr was blinded by the flash. “Have you got anything to say about this graffiti?” Dagný removed the bulky camera from her face without turning toward him, and instead continued to inspect the inscription.

“No, nothing.” Freyr studied her profile. Although it conveyed a particular kind of toughness, her short, messy hair brought out the femininity in her face—which was no doubt the opposite of what she intended. He hadn’t worked out whether it was her role as a policewoman that made her try to conceal her sex appeal, or whether it was down to her lifestyle. Dagný was unusual in this regard; generally he could read people like a book, and this uniqueness of hers attracted him, even though he received little or no response to his feeble attempts to deepen their relationship. She seemed comfortable in his presence on the rare occasions that they met, yet their friendship never seemed to have a chance to intensify. Either he was ready for it and she wasn’t, or else the few times she had shown some interest he was immediately racked by doubt and backed off. His doubts had nothing to do with her, but with himself; deep within him dwelt the suspicion that he wasn’t worthy of her, that he was too broken and burned to make a connection with her or with any other person. But then his doubts would evaporate and she would retreat, leaving them permanently caught in this ridiculous vicious circle.

This was the first time for many years that he hadn’t known how to go about handling a relationship with someone, and it had awakened in him memories of his life before he’d become a specialist in human behavior. These memories were probably the root of his attraction to Dagný, but he made a point of not wondering about this or drawing conclusions for fear of obliterating his feelings and

ending up all alone, as he had been before. He turned away from her and focused on the word scribbled on the wall. He shook his head and blew out slowly, as he always did when he was thinking. “Of course, various things come to mind, though none of them are particularly helpful.”

“For example?” Her voice was devoid of feeling, reminding him of the bored girls who worked at his local bakery when they asked whether he wanted them to slice his bread.

“Well, dirty money, dirty laundry, dirty politicians, dirty cops, dirty movies. Something along those lines, though I don’t see how they could possibly be connected to the vandalism.” Dagný’s expression didn’t change. She raised the camera to her eyes again and snapped a photo. It was hard to see what that one photo would add. After taking a photo she always examined the image in the little screen to make sure she’d captured what she’d intended, so she could hardly be worried she’d messed up the ones she’d already taken. He wondered if she used the camera as a mask to hide behind.

“I thought psychologists studied these things. Don’t you need to know the motivation behind what people write when they’re in an agitated mental state?”

“Yes, but usually we have more to go on than a single word. Maybe I missed the class on people who break into schools, go berserk, and write mysterious messages on the wall.” As soon as he said this, Freyr regretted it. Why was he letting her sarcasm get on his nerves? It wasn’t as if he was trying to be a comedian, or making light of the situation. “I recommend you try to find the culprit the traditional way, then if you do, I’ll speak to him and give you my opinion as to what might have made him do this. For the moment I can’t add much to your investigation.” In fact, he didn’t know what she’d called him out; his job description at the Regional Hospital in Ísafjörður didn’t include giving advice to the police, and she hadn’t behaved as though she expected his opinion to mark a turning point in the investigation. “Unless you want me to look up similar incidents elsewhere and see what conclusions I can draw from them? I don’t know if that would be useful.”

“No, no.” Dagný’s tone was brusque, but softened when she hurriedly added: “Thanks, but that won’t be necessary.”

The sound of children’s voices carried in through the window. Under normal circumstances there would probably have been in this room, playing or drawing more pictures to adorn its walls, but this morning was far from ordinary. The teacher who had turned up first had been stunned, and had immediately called the police to report the break-in. Dagný and an older officer had been sent to the scene; Freyr supposed she’d been sent because she reported for work early. The normal day shift for police officers didn’t start until eight, but Dagný habitually woke around six, regardless of whether she was working. The only difference was that she was generally out of the door at seven o’clock on work days, apparently too restless to hang around at home any longer. This he knew only because she lived across the road from him, and his morning routine was much the same. In this respect they had something in common: neither of them liked wasting time doing nothing. This appealed to him; in the few relationships he’d had in his life, the women had always wanted to cuddle in bed for as long as possible and hadn’t understood his urge to jump out of bed as soon as he opened his eyes, preferably before the paper came through the letterbox. He could happily imagine a relationship in which he would have company in the kitchen while it was dark and quiet outside and others slept. He had no other ideas as to what he was looking for in a life companion; too little time had passed since his divorce. He couldn’t work out whether his memories of his previous relationship before everything went wrong were a realistic reflection of what he was looking for, or whether he was viewing them in a rosy light. In fact he knew the answer; he just didn’t want to face it.

Freyr went over to the window and at first saw only his own reflection in the glass. He looked younger than his age but that was doubtless because he kept himself in shape, thus avoiding the extra pounds that had started to weigh down his former classmates from medical school. Still, this was on fair, since he hadn't enjoyed as much female attention as they had during his university years. These days, luckily, women seemed to appreciate his strong facial features; and, given that he remembered what it was like to have to clear his throat to get a woman's attention, he was planning on holding on to his looks for a while. Naturally they would start declining at some point, but he still had several years to go until he hit forty, so it wasn't like he had one foot in the grave just yet.

The children were scattered around the playground, their snowsuits making them look stiff and almost spherical. Although the winter had been unusually mild, it was still cold outside and their fiercer red cheeks glowed beneath multicolored bobble hats. Freyr could well imagine that this incident would result in a spate of visits to the health clinic; the flu was going around and ear infections were on the increase. If the children weren't going to be allowed back in until things were cleaned up here, they might have to stay outdoors for the rest of the day. "When can the poor things come back inside?" Freyr watched a girl topple onto her head after walking straight into a sandpit.

"When we're finished." Dagný took more photos. The flash in the window indicated that she had moved over to the basic-looking bookshelves lying on top of their former contents. "It shouldn't take too much longer; we've already taken fingerprints from most of what the vandal might conceivably have touched, but I don't expect anything to come of it. It's my understanding that every square centimeter in here is covered with fingerprints. It's going to be nearly impossible to determine whether any of them belong to him."

Freyr said nothing as he continued to watch the children. If he squinted, he could imagine that he had gone back in time several years and that this was his son's playground. One of the children could have been his son; there were several boys who moved like he had as a toddler, and when they were tucked and bundled up it was easy for Freyr to deceive himself. However, he wouldn't allow himself to indulge in the fantasy. It would be too painful to abandon the dream world and return to the cold reality in which there was no longer any place for his son.

The door opened to admit Veigar, the older police officer who had responded to the call with Dagný. "How's it going here?" He looked around and shook his head. "What a fucking abomination." He was accustomed to working with Dagný, so it didn't bother him when she didn't reply. Instead of repeating the question or taking offense, he turned to Freyr. "Have you solved the case for us, mate?"

Freyr pulled himself away from the window and smiled in reply. "No, I haven't pieced it together yet; but, from the evidence, I'd say a pretty sick person was at work here."

"Yes, it doesn't take an expert from the south to see that." Veigar bent down to pick up a broken chair leg. "How could anyone do this? I have no interest in understanding what drove this idiot to it, I just want to know *how* he actually did it."

"Was nothing spared?" Freyr had only managed to glance over the place but of course he'd noticed various things on his way in: the children's coat rack in the lobby had been destroyed, the hooks and the shelves above them all torn down from the walls.

"Very little. The kitchen, for example, was in a right bloody state."

"But was this the only message?"

Veigar scratched his head. "Yes. Maybe he meant to write more but didn't have time for it. He was probably exhausted after making all this mess."

“We don’t know whether it was a man or a woman.” Dagný didn’t look up, busying herself instead with putting the camera into a black bag. “It could even have been a couple or a group of people. It barely seems possible for one man to do all this alone, even if he did have the entire weekend.”

“He certainly didn’t hold back.” Freyr nudged a pile of track sections from a wrecked wooden track set with his foot. “Didn’t anyone notice anything? Neighbors, or passersby? All this must have made quite a racket.”

“Not that we know of. We haven’t contacted all the residents of the adjacent buildings but the ones we spoke to didn’t notice anything, or at least nothing clicked if they did hear something. There’s quite a distance between the buildings,” replied Veigar.

A red plastic bucket bounced off the window where Freyr had just been standing and they all looked around in surprise. “The poor kids must be getting bored out there,” said Veigar. “Something’s got to be done if they can’t come in. It’s only an hour until lunch and the only toilet they’ve got access to has a permanent queue outside.”

“Have you spoken to the headmistress?” Dagný pushed down hard on the camera in order to close the bag.

“Yes, and she’s not too pleased with the situation; I mean, she understands, but she’s still annoyed. The children must be getting cold.”

Freyr waited for Dagný to snap that they would just have to grin and bear it, but she didn’t. On the contrary, she displayed an unusual amount of consideration, for her: “They should be able to have the smaller room in fifteen minutes or so. It was empty, so it wasn’t damaged much. They’ll have to eat with their plates in their laps, though; I still haven’t come across any undamaged furniture.”

“I’ll let the headmistress know. She’ll be relieved.” Veigar walked out and left the door open, giving them a clear view of the devastation.

“I’d better get going. I don’t think I can be of much more use here—if I was of any use to start with.” Freyr looked back toward the window and the children playing outside. They seemed even more restless than before. They were probably starting to get hungry. His attention was caught by a boy of three or four, not because he reminded him of his son but because unlike the others he stood stock still, staring at Freyr as he stood there at the window. Although an attempt had been made to shield the children from what had happened they had sensed that everything wasn’t as it should be, and the boy’s expression suggested that he believed Freyr to be the evildoer who had destroyed the schoolroom. The child appeared fearless, in fact, his stare and frozen expression suggestive of pent-up rage, which seemed to be directed at Freyr. Freyr tried to smile and waved at the child to let him know that he wasn’t the bad guy, but it had no effect. There was not a flicker in the child’s stony face.

“Are you making faces at that kid there?” Dagný had come up beside him and was now pointing at the boy in the green snowsuit. “Weird kid.” She rubbed her upper arms as if she felt cold, even with the warmth of the school.

“It looks to me like he thinks I’m the vandal. At least he’s glaring at me like I am. Maybe he’s scared.”

Dagný nodded slowly. “It’s strange that more of the kids don’t seem scared.”

“I’m sure some of them are worried, but hopefully they’ve shrugged it off and got lost in playing board games instead. Most children have an incredible ability to block out bad feelings, but this little boy clearly isn’t that type.” Freyr couldn’t take his eyes off him. The other children had obeyed a staff member and gone inside to eat. The boy must have heard her too, but he hadn’t moved a muscle and

didn't take his eyes from the window. Suddenly the headmistress came out and pulled the boy away. As they walked off he turned back so as not to lose sight of Freyr. It wasn't until he'd gone around the corner that they broke eye contact.

"Well, well!" Dagný raised an eyebrow at him. "If I hadn't seen you this weekend I might have a reason to question you about your movements." She smiled, which was rare; a real shame considering how beautiful and genuine her smile was. His ex-wife had smiled often and it had been a lovely sight until life deprived her of any reason to do so. Freyr smiled back, delighted that she had paid him any attention at all. But Dagný's expression immediately resumed its usual seriousness. "I don't know why, but all of this is making me feel kind of uncomfortable."

Freyr surveyed the destruction in the classroom again. "I'm not surprised. You have every reason to be concerned, and even to wonder what this individual is going to do next."

"No, I don't mean uncomfortable about that. I mean I've got a strange feeling, as though I'm forgetting or have overlooked something, as though there's more to this than just someone giving in to their destructive urges. I was hoping you could explain it."

Freyr was silent for a moment as he considered his reply. He didn't want to interact with her as a psychiatrist; it was one thing to examine the weekend's evidence as a participant in a police investigation, but quite another to approach her personally in his clinical capacity. One of the main reasons he had taken the job in Ísafjörður was that it gave him the opportunity to practice general medicine alongside his specialty. There was no need for a full-time psychiatrist here, and that suited him well. He had enough on his plate dealing with his own mental state, without having to immerse himself in others' every day of the week. He noticed that Dagný was fidgeting, impatient at his lack of response to her question, so he hurriedly replied: "I expect it's a combination of things—this dreadful scene, which would leave a bad taste in anyone's mouth, and the urge to find the guilty party. You're under pressure to tie up the investigation of the crime scene, so you're also concerned about missing something that might matter. And to top it all off, your mind is trying to process all of this. The outcome is the feeling you describe." He stopped there, although he could easily have gone on for much longer.

"I see." She didn't seem very convinced but said nothing further, since Veigar had stuck his head around the door. "Dagný, we need to get going. Gunnir and Stefán have come to finish up here, because we're needed elsewhere." He gave her a look meant to convey that something even more serious than the desecration of a children's classroom had taken place.

Dagný hurriedly said good-bye and rushed off with Veigar, leaving Freyr standing there. He had to content himself with calling good-bye to them before the door banged shut.

He stood in the lobby, surrounded by children, and by teachers who were deftly removing the youngsters' snowsuits. One of them bundled four children into the corridor, telling them that now they would get to eat in the little gym, what fun! Freyr winked and waved at several of the children on his way past, then bid farewell to the staff, who responded in kind without looking up from their work. As he took hold of the front door handle, he felt a tug at his trouser leg and looked down with a smile. It was the boy who'd been standing outside. He was still wearing his green snowsuit. The boy stared silently up at Freyr without releasing his trouser leg. For some reason Freyr felt slightly uncomfortable in the child's presence, although he was used to odd behavior in his dealings with his patients. He bent down to the boy. "Did you see the police here before? I'm helping them catch the bad guy." The boy carried on staring, still not saying a word. "The police always catch the bad guy."

The boy muttered something that Freyr didn't catch properly, but before he could ask the boy to repeat it one of the teachers called the child over. Freyr straightened up and went outside. Apparently the child wasn't immune to the effects of the mess and destruction inside after all—he thought he whispered "*Dirty.*"

Chapter 3

Katrín sat on the edge of the porch behind the house, closed her eyes, and relished breathing in the clean air. The wood had sunk into the ground in one corner, meaning she had to lean into the house to keep her balance. The sun was already up, hanging low in the sky as if it had turned up sick for work and didn't expect to make it through the whole day. Its rays didn't feel hot, but rather lukewarm, although Katrín had no complaints after having been inside the cold house. Anyway, you couldn't make demands of the sun this far north in the dead of winter; you simply took what little sunshine you were given and were grateful. Gentle gusts of wind blew over her face and the fresh breeze carried away the paint smell that had settled in her clothing and hair. The feeling was profoundly satisfying and she breathed as deeply as her lungs allowed. The smell of chemicals always made her feel uncomfortable, since each inhalation reminded her of the toll the toxic vapor was taking on her limited number of brain cells. No doubt today's painting frenzy had killed a good number of them.

Katrín opened her eyes and stretched. If you ignored the babble of the stream separating the house from the abandoned village, the silence was absolute. Finding it a little uncomfortable, she listened harder, but nothing changed. She and Garðar had both had trouble sleeping in the silence the night before, even though they were exhausted by the seemingly endless conveyance of things from the pier. Líf, on the other hand, who couldn't help much after being so sick, had slept like a rock. They could have used her help; the wheelbarrow the skipper had mentioned had been nowhere to be found, meaning they had to carry everything themselves. Katrín had resolved to count the number of trips, but lost count as exhaustion took over, so she didn't know whether it had been twenty, fifty, or even a hundred. Her aches and pains told her all she needed to know; her upper arms hurt at the mere thought of last night's travails. She rubbed her sore muscles. Frustratingly, as she'd suspected, all the hard grind at the gym in recent years appeared to have been no help.

Katrín shifted position on the porch and tried to spot Garðar and Líf on the slope west of the village, but it was hard to detect anything much through all the angelica, dry and dead since last summer, and downright impossible to see all the way to the top. Garðar had said that the slope seemed gentle most of the way up, then there was level ground that reached almost to the next fjord to the north. Katrín suspected Garðar hadn't had much to go on when he described the conditions there. She felt too comfortable to stand up and try to see them, and she was sure they'd be back soon anyway. She wasn't entirely certain how long ago they'd left; it had been many years since she had worn a wristwatch, contenting herself with the clock on her mobile phone. But the phone's battery was too precious to leave it turned on. One thing was certain—they'd been away for so long that she was utterly relieved not to have gone with them. The skipper had said there was mobile phone reception on top of the hill, but that information might be about as reliable as his tale about the wheelbarrow. Maybe they'd have to walk much further in search of a good connection once they were up on the

summit. It would have killed her to have to tramp around up there, and in any case, Garðar didn't need her there just to ask the estate agent whether some boxes they'd found in the house belonged to the estate or to the estate. Katrín didn't see why he was wasting time on this, especially given that they depended on the phone being charged if the weather were to turn bad or they needed emergency assistance, but once he'd decided on something he was immovable, so she hadn't objected. Even when Líf, who was too unwell to help out with the renovations, said that she would accompany him, Katrín had held her tongue, though she longed to say that Líf really should be trying to paint something. She guessed the reason Líf was so keen on going off with Garðar was because she knew Katrín would find work for her to do as soon as the two of them were left alone. Katrín wasn't quite as compassionate as Garðar, who had told Líf that morning that she should just rest until she felt better.

She peered again through the yellowed sea of vegetation in the hope of locating them. Maybe something had happened; neither of them was used to hiking in the mountains, and Líf was quite accident-prone to boot. She smiled. Of course they were all right. What could possibly happen? They were the three of them were the only people here, and apart from the birds, a gray fox appeared to be the only other living thing in the area. The animal had watched them from afar as they moved their materials the night before, but it hadn't appeared today; Putti's presence had probably frightened it away. Once Garðar and Líf had set off, Katrín was virtually alone in the world, since the blessed dog had let itself be persuaded to go with them even though its short legs hardly looked sturdy enough to climb mountains. This was the first time she'd experienced such total isolation and she found the surroundings and the empty house behind her oppressive. She would gladly have welcomed the company of the fox, if it made an appearance. Katrín had no idea whether foxes were mostly nocturnal, or if they came out during the day. She hoped that the animal would show its face, but she primarily wanted Garðar to come back—and Líf, of course. She struggled to her feet, but although she could now see most of the slope, she still couldn't catch the slightest glimpse of them—though that meant almost nothing, since both of them were wearing clothing in earth tones that would blend in with the snowless winter landscape. She was searching for signs of movement along the path they'd taken when she heard a sudden creak in the house behind her. A chill ran down her spine and she instinctively moved a little further away. She longed to run up the slope to where Garðar and Líf must be.

Then she relaxed. She could be such a wuss. This was an old house—there was nothing unnatural about a noise or two. It was only thermal expansion of the wood in the sun. She was just so unused to this oppressive silence. Still, she yelled out when a hand gripped her firmly by the shoulder and someone shouted, “Boo!”

“Idiot!” Katrín shoved Garðar's hand away and stamped her foot, furious. “I could have had a heart attack.” She'd never liked sudden shocks, ever since childhood, and her anger at Garðar was always directed at all those who had played this same trick on her through the years. “I hate it when you do that.”

Garðar pulled back his hand in surprise. “Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you.” His expression, full of remorse, made Katrín think of all the painters who had captured that same expression in their immortal works of art.

“You just really startled me.” She smiled apologetically. “You're not an idiot. It was just a knee-jerk reaction.” Garðar looked like a hurt child and she felt a sting of remorse as she remembered how sensitive he'd become after months of unemployment. “I'd just been trying to catch sight of you and

the slope, and I really didn't expect you to sneak up on me from behind like that." It must have been Garðar making the creaking noise as he walked through the house. They had all noticed the large number of loose and worn-down floorboards that loudly reminded you of their presence every time you stepped on them. "But I'm so glad you're back. Where's Líf?"

Garðar looked as if he were trying to decide whether he should hold her little outburst against her or let it go, and in the end he seemed to decide to be his old cheerful self. He smiled and stroked her hair, and she could see a flash of the good old Garðar reappearing: the Garðar who was rising rapidly through the ranks of one of the country's biggest investment companies; the Garðar who got the most out of life; the Garðar she'd fallen in love with. "She went inside. She was going to find some food for us." He kissed her on the cheek. "I didn't mean to creep up on you; I just didn't realize how fast you can move."

"What? I'm like a snail; I can hardly move an inch for my aching muscles."

"A snail? A cheetah, more like—we could see you out at the front of the house, but when I was nearly here you shot inside so fast that I thought the house had caught fire." Garðar kissed her other cheek. "So I followed, and found you standing behind the house. What's going on?"

Katrín frowned. "I was never in front of the house. I finished the wall I was painting and came out here on the porch to get some fresh air and look out for you. Maybe your eyes were playing tricks on you."

Garðar shrugged, but appeared as surprised by Katrín's explanation as she was by his story. "I guess so. Has anyone else come here since we left? Was there a boat, or something?"

She shook her head. "Did we drop something yesterday that the wind could have picked up? Could it have been a piece of clothing or some carpet? The sun's so low that it's hard to make out anything properly. It was probably just some litter. Maybe it was the fox."

"Maybe." He nudged the sagging porch with his foot. "I need to repair this. No matter where I look there's some sort of project."

"At least you don't have to do anything more to my wall." Katrín grinned proudly. "It's ready for the first guests, all white and beautiful." She was glad he wanted to change the subject. She didn't want to wonder any more about what Garðar and Líf had seen or not seen. The idea that there was someone else in the area was ridiculous, and made her feel uncomfortable. They were just unused to the silence and the empty environment. "I guess I'd better start the next wall while there's still some light." Then she remembered Garðar's reason for going up the hill. "What did the estate agent say? Could you get reception?"

"He didn't answer. It might be better to try at the end of the day; he could be somewhere in town showing a property, or just busy." Garðar looked back at the house. "We'll just look in the boxes and if it's clearly junk, we'll leave it. Otherwise we'll take it back with us if we don't get hold of the agent. I can't be bothered to keep going up there just to try and get hold of him. It would be a lot less hassle just to carry the stuff down to the pier when we leave."

Katrín sighed. "I never want to hear the word 'carry' again." She leaned up against Garðar, wrapped her arms around his waist and shifted her body weight over to him. "Maybe you'll have to carry me. I'm worse than I was this morning."

"You'll be lucky, today. You're not the only one with aching muscles." He kissed her on the head, somewhat distractedly, before straightening up. "I'm starving. Shall we go and have some of the delicious provisions Líf's preparing?"

The thought of the tinned food, bread, and other things that they'd bought for their trip didn't whet her appetite much. "I'd kill for a pizza."

Garðar smiled faintly. "Not on the menu." He unwound himself from her embrace and prepared to go inside. "And even if we could get some, I don't feel like climbing back up the mountain to order. Come on; let's have something to eat while it's still fresh. I don't know what we'll have left by the time we get to our last few days, so we may as well enjoy eating something besides instant noodles. Through the kitchen window they could see Líf chopping something, her lips moving as she spoke either to herself or to the dog. Katrín wondered if this was why Líf had decided to get a pet: after Einar died, obviously Líf had no one to talk to at home, which must have been difficult for her. Katrín slipped her hand into Garðar's palm and entwined her slender fingers in his strong, stubby ones. Although they'd been together for over five years now, there were still moments when she found herself wondering how it had happened. During their time as schoolmates—through half of primary school and all of secondary school—he had never shown any interest in her, so she'd settled for admiring him from afar and letting herself dream. He'd been part of a clique to which she would never belong; the good-looking, clever kids on their way up had little in common with a young woman who was neither a beauty queen nor particularly brainy. That was the world of Garðar, Líf, Einar and others whom life had spoiled in every way imaginable. But despite the fact that she was very average-looking, constantly struggling to lose a few pounds, and always had her head buried in a book, Garðar had made a beeline for her at a club downtown two years after graduating and they'd never looked back. That same evening Líf and Einar had paired up, and it was precisely because of this parallel that Katrín always got goosebumps at the thought that Einar was now dead and Líf a widow. She had to remind herself regularly that she wasn't going to suffer the same fate just because her relationship with Garðar had started on the same day.

Garðar freed his hand from her grip and sat down on the porch. As he was taking off his shoes, which he declared were grafted onto his feet, Katrín went in to check on Líf. She found her still in the kitchen, where they were keeping their food even though there was no refrigerator or running water. There was a sink, which Garðar said he thought could be fed from the stream, but none of them had any idea how to hook it up. Líf had her back to Katrín as she cut bread on a warped chopping board they'd found in a drawer, the board rattling against the countertop with every stroke of the knife. Katrín stopped in the doorway and had to raise her voice to make herself heard. "How was it?"

Now it was Líf's turn to be startled. She gave a little cry and straightened up abruptly as the chopping board clattered on the counter. Then she turned around with the knife flat against her chest where her hand had moved reflexively in fright. "Jesus."

Katrín regretted not being more careful in approaching her. All her irritation at Líf for having dragged her feet when it came to the renovation work drifted away. "God, sorry. I thought you'd noticed me."

Líf paused to catch her breath before speaking. "It's not your fault." She let the knife fall and exhaled. "I've been sort of highly strung since Einar died. First I couldn't be alone, and now I can't be in others' company." She smiled. "It's kind of frustrating."

"I can imagine." Katrín had no idea how she should react. Líf was much more open than she was and had repeatedly tried to discuss Einar's death with her, but Katrín never knew how to respond for fear of coming across as too cold, overly solicitous, or somehow stupid. It was unbearable, in fact, and Líf couldn't have failed to notice how nimbly she generally managed to avoid discussing Einar.

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