

# THE PREY

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## PROLOGUE

The woman on the doorstep looked nothing like Kolbeinn had pictured her when they'd spoken on the phone. Her deep, husky voice seemed at odds with her slim figure and cheerful demeanour. He had been expecting someone far more world-weary, with a cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth and a miniature of vodka in her pocket. The woman standing at his door looked more likely to drink spinach juice than alcohol, and there was no way she could be a smoker. But the moment she introduced herself, her voice removed all doubt that she was the woman who had phoned.

'Sorry it's taken so long. I just didn't have any reason to come to Reykjavík before now.' She held out a cardboard box. As Kolbeinn took it, he registered the weight of the contents. Books, he guessed. 'Like I said, we found this box in the loft,' the woman went on. 'Behind a pile of old insulation off-cuts. I expect that's why it got left behind when you cleared out the house.'

Kolbeinn apologised that he and his brother hadn't done a better job of emptying the loft. The woman replied that there was no need; it didn't matter. She herself had accidentally left a bike in the cycle shed when she and her husband had moved out of their flat and into Kolbeinn's father's house. These things happened.

The box was covered in dust. Kolbeinn put it down. It was marked back and front with a brand of margarine that was

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no longer on the market, a brand he couldn't even remember seeing in the shops. The box must date from decades ago.

The woman suddenly seemed struck by a thought. 'Oh, yes, I nearly forgot: I've brought something else too. I don't know if it'll be of any interest to you but I didn't like to just throw it away.' She pulled a clear plastic bag from her coat pocket and handed it to him. Inside, there was a small brown object that he couldn't immediately identify. 'It's a shoe. We found it back in the autumn when we were digging the foundations for our deck. I expect it belonged to you or your brother.'

Now that she'd said it, Kolbeinn could see that it was a shoe. A small child's lace-up shoe, made of brown leather, he thought, though it was hard to guess the original colour. It could have been white for all Kolbeinn knew. The laces at least must have changed colour over the years and were now as brown as the soil the shoe had been lying in.

Whatever its original appearance, Kolbeinn was sure that, like the brand of margarine on the box, he had never seen it before. Not that this was necessarily significant. The shoe couldn't have belonged to a child older than about three or four, and he had absolutely no memories from that age, so for all he knew it could have been his. In any case, it must have belonged to a member of his family, or perhaps a visiting child, because his parents had built the house and the shoe was unlikely to have been lying in the ground when they bought the plot.

Kolbeinn raised his eyes to the woman's. 'Thanks. That's interesting.' She seemed disappointed that he had nothing else to say about the relic. Perhaps she'd been hoping to hear the story of how the shoe had come to be lost, but he had no idea what that story might be. He tried to make up for the fact:

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‘I bet we searched high and low for it at the time. We didn’t have an endless supply of clothes and shoes in those days.’ He turned the bag over in his hands, examining the shoe. ‘I wonder how on earth it came to be buried under the lawn. The garden was already well established by the time my brother and I would have been wearing shoes this size.’

The woman nodded. ‘Yes. It is rather odd. Mind you, it did turn up right beside the flagpole, so I’m guessing it might have fallen into the hole when the foundation was being dug and no one noticed.’ She looked at him a little anxiously. ‘We took the flagpole down – I hope you don’t mind.’

He smiled. ‘No, of course not. It’s your house now and you can do what you like with it. The flagpole was never particularly popular. Not with my mother, anyway. She told me they’d only ever raised a flag once, and then only to half mast. She didn’t say what the occasion was, but she did say she’d nagged Dad for years to get rid of it.’

The woman appeared relieved. ‘If he was responsible for putting it up, I can understand why he didn’t want to take it down. It was embedded in an oil barrel full of concrete. We had to hire a small crane to remove it.’

This didn’t surprise Kolbeinn. His father had never done things by halves – on land or sea. If he installed a flagpole, you could be sure it would withstand anything the elements chose to fling at it.

They exchanged a bit more small talk. He asked how she was enjoying life in the small town of Höfn í Hornafirði, in the south-east of the country, some 450 kilometres from Reykjavík. She said it was great. She asked in return if he ever thought about moving back there, and he said he couldn’t see it happening. He was too much of a city boy now, having come to live in the capital as a child, following his parents’ divorce.

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After this, they ran out of things to say. Their paths had only crossed through the sale of his father's house, after all. Kolbeinn and his brother hadn't met the woman or her husband at any stage in the process, leaving it to the estate agent in Höfn to take care of all communication with the buyers. Actually, things might have moved faster if the brothers had got more involved, but neither had been that fussed. Their father had died a well-off man and once his estate had been wound up, there was no particular urgency about releasing the capital tied up in the house. Their part in the process had merely been to agree to the sale and sign the papers. Although their mother had survived their father, she hadn't inherited the house. Not that it would have made much difference if she had, since she was incapacitated by dementia. If she'd been required to sign the contract, she wouldn't have known which way round to hold the pen, let alone how to write her name.

After a brief, awkward silence, Kolbeinn blurted out an offer of coffee, which the woman declined, saying she had a long drive ahead of her and needed to get going while it was still light. He thanked her again for the box and the shoe, and they said goodbye.

Kolbeinn watched her walking away and waved to her as she got in the car. Then he closed the front door, still holding the plastic bag. It was kind of her not to have simply thrown the shoe away, but really it was only a matter of time before he did so himself. He wasn't the type to hang on to old junk, and a child's shoe that had been buried in the ground for donkey's years definitely fell into that category.

Still, maybe his brother would like it. Especially if it had belonged to him. Neither of them had kept much from their father's estate. Since moving to Reykjavík with their mother,

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they'd had only sporadic contact with their dad, so there were few memories attached to any of his things. When the brothers travelled east together to empty the house, they had soon realised that none of the furniture or other belongings held any sentimental value for them, and decided to sell or throw away the bulk of the contents.

The stuff they had chosen to keep amounted to barely any more than this box and the child's shoe.

Kolbeinn removed the shoe from the bag. The dried-out leather smelt faintly of earth. It was so hard to the touch and the laces were so stiff that it was more like the cast of a shoe. He turned it over in his hands but there was nothing familiar about it. When he looked inside, though, he saw something that triggered a childhood memory.

Above the heel he could make out a name tag of the type his mother used to glue or sew into all the brothers' clothing until they were well into their teens. The labels were supposed to ensure that their belongings would be returned if they ever forgot or mislaid them.

The shoe must have belonged to Kolbeinn or his brother, then. He scratched at the label in a vain attempt to clean the dirt off the red embroidered lettering. In doing so, he inadvertently dislodged one of the laces, revealing the original colour of the leather underneath.

Kolbeinn was a little taken aback. As far as he could tell, the shoe had once been pink. It couldn't possibly have belonged to him or his brother. Although nowadays children's clothes were no longer strictly colour-coded according to gender, it had been different in his parents' day – especially his father's. He had been a bit older than their mother and even more old-fashioned in his views. There was no way he would ever have agreed to let his sons wear pink shoes.

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But why would his mother have sewn a name tag in the shoe of someone else's daughter? It was almost unthinkable that anyone else could have done it. His mother had been the only person who labelled clothes that way: other mothers had made do with marking their children's things in ink, if they bothered labelling them at all. He remembered this because he and his brother had been teased about it at school. Other mothers apparently had better things to do with their time than sit there painstakingly embroidering their children's names onto small fabric tags.

Kolbeinn's curiosity was aroused. He decided to wet the tag in an attempt to wash off the dirt and see if he could read the name. There was no danger the letters would run and become illegible since they were embroidered onto the label.

The water in the kitchen sink turned brown as he rubbed the shoe under the tap. By the time he could finally make out some of the raised letters his fingers were sore.

The first letter was clearly an 'S'. This was followed by something that could have been an 'a', an 'e' or an 'o'. Then there was an 'l', followed by two illegible letters and finally an 'r'. It didn't take him long to look up Icelandic girls' names of six letters that began with an 'S' and ended with an 'r', and there were only two on the list he found online: Salvör and Sólvör.

Kolbeinn put the shoe down.

Salvör.

The name nudged at something in his past. But the harder he tried to recall it, the more elusive the memory became. It was like trying to grab hold of smoke. In the end he gave up.

Putting the shoe on the draining board, he watched the brown water trickling down the sink, aware of strange feelings



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stirring inside him. He tried to empty his mind, pushing away anything that could conceivably be connected to the name. Not thinking about things you couldn't remember was often the most effective way of retrieving them. You could be sure the memory would pop to the surface, like a child who wants nothing to do with you until you pretend to ignore them.

Before his theory could be put to the test, the phone rang. It was a member of staff from his mother's nursing home, calling to tell him to hurry over as his mother had had a suspected heart attack and the outcome was touch and go.

It was a long time since his mother had enjoyed anything like a normal existence, and her health had been going downhill rapidly in recent months. Even so, this was a distressing phone call to receive. He spluttered something while he was recovering from the initial shock, then said he was on his way.

'Will you let your brother know?'

Kolbeinn said he would. Before the nurse rang off, she added: 'And your sister. It matters a lot to your mother to have her here too. Though it's very difficult to understand her, she's been asking for her repeatedly ever since she had her attack. So please could you make sure she gets the message.'

'My sister?'

'Yes,' the nurse said, sounding a little flustered. 'Salvör. She wants to see her daughter, Salvör.'

# Chapter 1

There were no tracks to suggest anyone had ever been there, just pristine white snow as far as the eye could see. No living creature moved in the landscape, but then few animals could scratch out an existence in the depths of winter in such a barren waste. They had come across stark evidence of this on the way there in the form of a dead sheep. The carcass had been buried in a drift, apart from a patch of exposed fleece, encrusted with clumps of snow. Clearly, a grim fate awaited any animal that wasn't rounded up in the autumn and taken down to the farms to wait out the winter. It had been a dispiriting sight and they hadn't lingered. There was nothing they could do for the poor beast now.

In the midst of the desolate, treeless landscape stood a large wooden hut. The faded paint must once have been much brighter, the texture less matt, but in spite of its weathered appearance, the hut stood out in sharp relief, moss green and rust red against an otherwise white backdrop.

Jóhanna paused to listen. There were no sounds coming from the hut. Apart from the squeaking of the snow under her companion Thórir's feet, the silence was absolute. Even the wind seemed to be holding its breath, as if exhausted by the recent storms. For the last few weeks, the depressions had formed an orderly queue across the Atlantic, one following inexorably on the heels of the other. In the end, Jóhanna had taken to switching off the radio before the forecast, as there

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was no point getting depressed about it. The weather came and went, behaving exactly as it pleased, and there wasn't a thing she could do to change it.

'There isn't a soul here.' Thórir, a member of a Reykjavík search and rescue team, came to stand beside her. 'No tracks. Total silence.'

Jóhanna didn't reply. After all, it was self-evident. She pointed up one of the snowy slopes that formed a deep bowl around the valley floor on which the hut stood. 'What do you make of that?' Jutting out of the snow near the top of the slope was a pair of reindeer antlers – or at least that's what it looked like to her. 'Are those antlers or branches?'

Thórir shrugged, the movement barely visible under his thickly padded snowsuit. Jóhanna was wearing identical survival gear, marked back and front with the logo of the Hornafjörður Search and Rescue Team. 'Can't tell,' he said. 'It's not a person, though.'

Jóhanna had nothing to add. She turned her attention back to the hut. 'Let's take a look inside, anyway, now that we've come all this way. Who knows? They could be in there, even though we can't hear anything. Asleep, maybe.'

'Or exhausted.'

Neither mentioned the third possibility. Instead, they set off over the frozen snow-crust towards the hut. They both knew when to keep quiet and for that Jóhanna was grateful. On previous searches she had often been paired with team members who yakked away nonstop. It didn't seem to matter whether she answered curtly or not at all; the person in question would simply talk all the more to make up for her silence. By the time she got home after a day like that her ears would be aching. No doubt the chatterer's jaws would be too – not that this was any compensation.

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Jóhanna was aware that her teammates thought she'd drawn the short straw when she was paired with Thórir. He had been seconded from a Reykjavík rescue team to assist with the search, along with a handful of people from other parts of Iceland. As he was from the big city and specially trained in disaster management, he was suspected of being a know-all who would look down on the local volunteers. This suspicion was based on nothing more substantial than the man's apparent assumption, when he first arrived, that his expertise would be required at the team's headquarters in Höfn. But because of the shortage of available manpower, he had been lent a snowsuit and packed off to join the searchers. This misunderstanding aside, Jóhanna hadn't been aware of anything in his demeanour to justify the others' prejudice. After all, the man had let her take charge and followed her lead without comment or criticism. Yet in spite of that, she couldn't shake off the feeling that everything she did was being carefully observed and judged.

They stepped up onto the raised wooden platform in front of the hut. Like everything else, it was covered in a deep layer of snow. Untouched snow. Jóhanna inspected the front of the building, noting the winter shutters nailed over the windows. This wasn't necessarily significant. If the trekkers had taken refuge here, they were unlikely to have bothered to remove the shutters. Who would care about the view from the windows if they had just made it to safety after an ordeal in the wilderness? Besides, the shutters provided additional protection against the blizzards that raged almost constantly at this time of year, nowadays especially. Jóhanna couldn't remember the storms having been this bad when she was a child, or at least not as relentlessly regular.

Above the door was a wooden board bearing the name of the hut: *Thule*. They stared at it, neither voicing aloud

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what they were doubtless both thinking: that the American sign seemed totally out of place up here in the Icelandic highlands. As if by tacit agreement, they began scraping the accumulated drifts away from the door. Even after they had cleared a sufficiently large area, they continued brushing away bits of snow and ice, delaying the moment of truth. Because although there were no indications that the party they were looking for were inside, they were both conscious of one thing: if the missing walkers were in there, they were very unlikely to be alive.

When their brushing and scraping had gone on so long that it was becoming embarrassing, Jóhanna drew a deep breath. There was no excuse not to open the door. The icy air flooding into her lungs did nothing to revive her, but at least she could blame her sudden shiver on that and tell herself that it had nothing to do with the ominous silence inside the hut.

‘Have you ever come across a dead body?’ Thórir seemed to read her mind.

This was the last thing Jóhanna wanted to think about now – or indeed ever. She always did her best to push the memories back down when they threatened to surface. ‘Yes, unfortunately.’

Thórir paused, then asked: ‘Many?’

Jóhanna sighed inwardly. If this was a test, it was a lousy one. ‘Three. And I’ve witnessed plenty of bad injuries too.’ Her mind presented her with images from the scene of a bus crash on the Hellisheidi mountain road outside Reykjavík, which she had attended two years earlier when she still lived in the capital. Three of the passengers had ended their journey among the jagged lava flows after being thrown from the vehicle by the force of the impact. This was followed, inevitably, by images from the accident she herself had been involved in,

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the accident that had left her lying like a rag doll, maimed and barely conscious, on the side of the road. It had been a narrow escape. She tried to focus on that thought: perhaps these missing people would be as lucky as she had been; perhaps they too would be saved, although the outlook seemed bleak. But it didn't work. Closing her eyes, she grimaced, then forced her mind back to the present. 'What about you?'

'Yes. Unfortunately.' The man seemed no more eager to talk about it than she was. Maybe he had wanted to find out how experienced she was, so as to gauge what response he could expect from her if they encountered a scene of horror inside.

Well, he needn't worry that she would freak out. Jóhanna opened her eyes again and squared her shoulders. 'I reckon the hut's as empty now as it was when the door closed behind the warden last autumn. I very much doubt we're going to be faced with anything grim.' Her words ran contrary to her gut instinct. There was something hostile about this godforsaken spot. People didn't belong here. Neither did the hut. Nature should have been left undisturbed.

Concealed under the snow, on the level ground surrounding the hut, there was a patchy meadow. The grass had been sown by volunteer conservationists in a vain attempt to soften the harsh terrain. Every summer they had to re-seed the large bare patches to prevent them from spreading. She herself had come here with her husband last summer to help with the task.

The trip had been a unique experience. Nature had pulled out all the stops, and the array of colours in this once active volcanic area had been unlike anything Jóhanna had seen before. In places, the mountains were literally blue; there was no need for distance to create the effect, the rhyolitic rocks had seen to that. Some of the slopes had combined every colour of

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the rainbow. She and her husband had visited not only this hut but also several others in the south-eastern highlands, as part of a fundraiser for the Hornafjörður Search and Rescue Team. Most of the hut owners in the region had been willing to pay for their greening services. As a result, they had travelled the length and breadth of the nature reserve with a relaxed team of volunteers. But the sense of wellbeing and spiritual uplift that Jóhanna had experienced on that trip now seemed remote, replaced by dread and a presentiment of doom.

Her despondent mood was only partly caused by the uniform blanket of snow that obscured the unearthly beauty of the bare rocks. It had more to do with the purpose of their mission. There was little reason for optimism, despite the attempts of the rescue-team leaders to raise morale before the team left base. No one had been convinced. Information about the missing travellers was thin on the ground, but the little the searchers had been told was decidedly odd.

They were looking for four or five individuals, all Icelanders, who had last been heard from more than a week ago. No one had noticed they were missing for five days, and severe weather conditions had prevented a search from being launched until this morning. While the blizzard was raging, the police had used the enforced wait to track the group as far as they could via their mobile phones, which had all last connected to the GSM network on the Kollumúli mountain road, heading into the Lónsöræfi wilderness. After that, all four had dropped off the grid.

It was unclear whether there had been a fifth member of the party. Signals had been picked up from only four mobile phones, but that alone was no guarantee of the number of travellers. The fifth person might not have been carrying a phone or might have switched it off. What suggested there

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could have been five people was that the two missing couples had flown to Hornafjörður but didn't appear to have hired or borrowed a car for their onward journey. They had spent one night at a hotel in Höfn, and the receptionist who checked them out had been under the impression that there was someone waiting outside to collect them, though whether that person was a man or a woman, she hadn't a clue.

Even more puzzling was the fact that no vehicle had yet been spotted parked by the Kollumúli track or any of the other access routes to the area that were passable at this time of year. Of course, if it had been a big mountain jeep with raised suspension, it could have driven off-road, further into the nature reserve, which meant it might still be found. Equally, it was possible that the party had arranged for a driver to give them a lift into the highlands and that the person in question had gone home afterwards. In that case, the driver would presumably come forward once the search was reported on the news.

Tourists going missing in the wilderness was nothing new. Nor was it unusual for them to blunder off into the unknown, in defiance of a bad weather forecast. But for a party of Icelanders to take it into their heads to go on a tourist jaunt in the wilds at this time of year was highly unusual. On the rare occasions that locals went missing in winter, it tended to be two or three friends who'd taken off on snowmobiles or cross-country skis. If it was autumn, you might also get a few ptarmigan hunters going astray.

But that wasn't the case this time. As far as anyone was aware, the missing people – two couples from Reykjavík, in their early thirties – weren't winter sports enthusiasts. In fact, they weren't known to be big outdoors types or particularly adventurous at all. The two men had apparently gone on a



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couple of organised reindeer shoots in the past, but the season was long over and the herds had all abandoned the area for their winter pastures in the lowlands. And neither of the women had ever applied for any type of hunting or fishing licence. No one knew why they had taken it into their heads to travel into the area. Perhaps they had simply been after that perfect Instagram shot.

Even this explanation seemed far-fetched, though. Picturesque white winters weren't confined to south-east Iceland; if they'd wanted to encounter a snowy landscape, they wouldn't have had to jump on a plane. There were plenty to choose from on Reykjavík's doorstep.

According to their next of kin, the couples had notified their families and workplaces that they would be away for just under a week: they were going on an adventure tour in the interior and would be without phone or internet reception. Beyond that, they had given away nothing about how they were planning to travel – whether they meant to walk or use cross-country skis or even snowmobiles – or where exactly they were heading. Some people said they had described it as a mystery tour. Their families were mostly under the impression that they must have paid for an organised trip that had been sold to them under that description.

So far, however, the police had had no success in tracking down any travel companies that sold mystery tours into the Lónsöræfi wilderness out of season. They'd have been surprised if they had. No serious tour operator would plan a rash undertaking like that, let alone sell it to members of the public.

The police did, however, establish that the East Skaftafell Touring Association had received an enquiry about accommodation in the Múlaskáli hut, which could have come from this group. They had explained to the caller that the hut was closed

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for the season. Although it was left unlocked in case it was required as an emergency shelter, it was not rented out to tour groups in winter. But the warden who spoke to the man had got the feeling he wasn't going to take no for an answer. After all, the hut was open, so there was nothing to stop him staying there.

As a result of this information, the largest party of searchers had been detailed to head straight to Múlskáli. They would check in and around the hut, as well as visiting the mountain cabin at Múlakot, which in summer was used as a base by rangers of the Vatnajökull Ice Cap National Park.

The rest of the team had split up into smaller groups to check the other huts in the area. In common with other uninhabited parts of Iceland, there was a sprinkling of such cabins in Lónsöræfi. A couple belonged to local walking clubs, there was a privately owned cabin at Eskifell, and then there was the hut that Jóhanna and Thórir had been tasked with searching. Although none of the owners had received any enquiries about renting their properties, that didn't rule out the possibility that the lost party might have taken refuge in one of them. As an afterthought, two men had been sent up the Víðidalur valley in case the travellers had sought shelter in one of the derelict farmhouses at Eskifell or Grund.

This type of scattergun approach was necessary when nothing was known for certain about a missing party's movements. The extra volunteers had come in useful too, since although the local rescue team was well manned, they couldn't cover an area of some three hundred and twenty square kilometres without support.

The Thule hut that Jóhanna and Thórir had been assigned to search had originally been built by a US Army unit based at the Stokksnes radar station on the coast, some twenty kilometres east of Höfn by road. Later, when the Icelandic Coast

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Guard had taken over the radar station, the hut had been thrown in, though from what Jóhanna had heard, the gift hadn't been particularly welcome. The Coast Guard staff had little use for it. No doubt they got their fill of outdoor adventures during their day job and weren't that eager to spend their summer holidays travelling in the Icelandic interior.

Jóhanna now took a step towards the door but Thórir got there first. Perhaps he wanted to uphold the honour of his Reykjavík rescue team. Or maybe he was afraid she'd despise him as a coward if he displayed any nerves about what they might discover inside. If he thought that, he was badly mistaken. Anyone who didn't dread coming across a tragic scene had no place on a search operation of this kind.

Jóhanna was content to let him go ahead. She watched him drag open the door and peer into the gloomy interior. From the expression of wonder that crossed his face, she gathered that he had seen something unexpected, but that it wasn't a dead body. He looked surprised, not saddened.

Jóhanna pushed the door wider and saw what it was. Just inside the entrance lay a heap of clothes. She thought she could see a thick padded jacket, a pair of over-trousers, a glove and a couple of snow boots, as well as the other bits of trekking gear you'd expect. The inner door was open into a dark hallway that appeared to be empty. Jóhanna fished out her torch, switched it on and directed the beam at the floor beyond the heap of clothes. There were signs of considerable activity in the layer of dust on the floorboards. The number of footprints indicated that several people had tramped in and out, though there was no way of telling how many or when.

'Do you think the tracks could have been made by our guys?' Thórir turned to her. 'And that the clothes are theirs too? Or could they have been left behind in the autumn?'

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Jóhanna couldn't answer that. But if the coat and boots had belonged to one of the party they were looking for, the individual in question couldn't be far away. No one in their right mind would have gone outside in the snow without them.

The silence was growing oppressive. Jóhanna stuck her head inside and sniffed warily. To her relief, the smell gave no indication that they were about to enter some kind of charnel house, though since it was as cold inside as it was outside, that indication might not be accurate.

They examined the brightly coloured clothes. Instinct told Jóhanna that they had been dropped there recently. Perhaps it was the absence of dust on them. There was nothing for it but to go inside and search the hut from top to bottom. It was the reason why they had gone to all the trouble of getting here, after all; first enduring the rough jolting in the back of a mountain truck, then being dropped off at the head of the trail and slogging along it for two hours, clambering over drifts, slipping and sliding, losing their footing, and ploughing through narrow gullies. Turning back now was out of the question.

'Let's have a look inside.' Jóhanna squeezed past Thórir, who made way for her. She didn't know if he did so out of politeness or because he was reluctant to go first. Not that it mattered. She bent down to examine the clothes. 'Judging by the size, I'd say they belonged to a woman. Or more than one woman.' She blew out a breath. 'Come on. Let's do this systematically. We'll start upstairs and work our way down.'

The air inside was stale. Thórir closed the door behind him, plunging everything beyond Jóhanna's torch beam into darkness. The weak winter light couldn't penetrate the heavy shutters. Hastily, he opened the door again, but even then the daylight didn't extend beyond the hall, and the hut was large, with rooms on two floors.

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When Thórir switched on his torch as well, the situation improved slightly. Jóhanna would have liked the beams to be stronger and illuminate a larger area, but it couldn't be helped. They would have to do their best with what light they had. They picked their way into the central space, then split up.

Twenty minutes later they were standing outside on the platform again, as mystified as before. They had found various signs of occupation. In one room, a pair of socks was lying inside out under a bed – free of dust, unlike the floor. In the kitchen, empty food packaging had been sorted into the relevant bins and it was clear that someone had cooked a meal there. Judging from the dates on the wrappers, they had been thrown away recently. In the toilet, they found a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste in a glass, and an almost empty packet of wet wipes on the shelf above the sink. The open waste bin on the floor beside the lavatory turned out to contain used dental floss and a scrunched-up wet wipe that looked as if it had been used to clean off mascara. A small towel hung by the sink. It was dry to the touch, as was the tea towel that had been draped over the handle of the oven door. Dry but not dusty. Almost everywhere they looked they could see evidence that people had been here.

Yet, despite searching high and low, they hadn't found the people themselves.

Jóhanna surveyed the surrounding landscape from the platform. White snow, white snow and more white snow. And then those reindeer antlers at the top of the slope. Shielding her eyes with one hand, she decided she had been right: they were antlers, not the twisted branches of a dwarf birch. They reminded her ominously of a skeletal hand, reaching its bony fingers towards the sky. A hump under the snow where they were protruding suggested it wasn't just antlers but an entire

## *The Prey*

animal. Jóhanna lowered her hand and looked away. The reindeer couldn't have anything to do with the missing people. 'Where the hell can they have got to?'

Thórir knotted his dark eyebrows. 'Perhaps they set off on a hike and got caught by a blizzard. It's been snowing nonstop for several days, so their tracks will have disappeared. Apparently, the recent snowfall has broken all records.'

He was right: it was the most likely explanation. The party had ventured out on a walk and ended up dying of exposure. The Lónsöræfi nature reserve covered a huge area and numerous hiking trails converged on the hut. It would be no easy task to find the missing walkers if their bodies had been buried under the snow. To make the job even more difficult, yet another storm was forecast, accompanied by several days of sub-zero temperatures.

She just hoped against hope that the couples had sought shelter in one of the other huts. Perhaps another group of searchers had already found them.

But this thought failed to comfort Jóhanna for long. A hike wouldn't explain why a coat, boots and other cold-weather gear had been left behind in the hall.

'We'd better head back before the light goes.' Jóhanna's eyes strayed to the antlers again. Their presence at the top of the slope troubled her. The men in the party had been hunters. If the animal had been shot, that might be relevant somehow. Pressed for time though she and Thórir were, they couldn't leave without making sure. It would look bad if the purpose of the trip turned out to have been poaching and they had failed to spot the fact. Besides, Jóhanna had a reputation for being thorough. 'But first we'd better take a look at that reindeer.'

As Thórir made no objection, they plunged off across the deep snow, moving as fast as they dared. In places the crust was paper thin and they sank halfway up their calves with

*Yrsa Sigurdardóttir*

every step. Their progress became even more of a struggle once they began to climb the slope. Just before they reached the antlers, Jóhanna came to an abrupt halt. ‘I trod on something.’ She looked down at her right leg.

‘A rock maybe?’ Thórir paused with his hands on his hips, grimacing.

‘No. It wasn’t a rock.’ Jóhanna extracted her foot and peered down the hole. Then she gave a sharp intake of breath, staggered and nearly fell over backwards down the slope. ‘Jesus. Jesus Christ.’

Thórir came over to where she was standing and nearly fell over backwards himself. At the bottom of the hole, part of a face could be seen, its wide-open eye staring blankly back at them.