

CHAPTER 1

He knew at once it was a human bone, when he took it from the baby who was sitting on the floor chewing it.

The birthday party had just reached its climax with a deafening noise. The pizza delivery boy came and went and the children gorged themselves on pizza and swigged Coca-Cola, shouting each other down the whole time. Then they jumped up from the table together, as if a signal had been given, and started running around again, some armed with machine guns and pistols, the younger ones clutching cars or plastic dinosaurs. He couldn't figure out what the game involved. For him it was all one maddening din.

The mother of the birthday boy popped some corn in the microwave. She told the man she would try to calm the children down, switch on the television and play a video. If that failed she would throw them out. This was the third time they had celebrated her son's eighth birthday and her nerves were stretched to breaking point. The third birthday party in a row! First all the family went out for a meal at an extortionate hamburger joint that played ear-splitting rock music. Then she gave a party for relatives and friends of the family, which was as grand an occasion as if he were being confirmed. Today, the boy had invited his classmates and friends from the neighbourhood.

She opened the microwave, took out the swollen bag of popcorn, put another in its place and thought to herself that she would keep it simple next year. One party and have done with it. As when she was a little girl.

It did not help matters that the young man sitting on the sofa was totally withdrawn. She had tried chatting to him, but she gave up and felt stressful with him in her sitting room. Conversation was out of the question: the noise and commotion that the boys were making left her nonplussed. He had not offered to help. Just sat there staring into space, saying nothing. Desperately shy, she thought to herself.

She had never seen the man before. He was probably aged around 25 and was the brother of one of her son's friends at the party. Almost 20 years between them. He was thin as a rake and he shook her hand at the door with long fingers, a clammy palm, reticent. He had come to fetch his brother, who refused point blank to leave while the party was still in full swing. They decided that he should step inside for a while. It would soon be over, she said. He explained to her that their parents, who lived in a town house down the road, were abroad and he was looking after his brother; he actually rented a flat in town. He fidgeted uncomfortably in the hallway. His little brother had escaped back into the fray.

Now he was sitting on the sofa watching the birthday boy's one-year-old sister crawling across the floor in front of one of the children's bedrooms. She wore a white frilly dress and a ribbon in her hair, and squealed to herself. He silently cursed his little brother. Being in an unfamiliar household made him uncomfortable. He wondered whether to offer his assistance. The mother told him that the boy's father was working late into the evening. He nodded and tried to smile. Declined the offer of pizza and Coke.

He noticed that the girl was holding some kind of toy which she gnawed at when she sat down, dribbling profusely. Her gums seemed to be irritating her. Probably teething, he thought.

As the baby girl approached him with her toy in her hand he wondered what it could be. She stopped, wriggled herself onto her backside, then sat on the floor with her mouth open, looking at him. A string of saliva dripped onto her chest. She put the toy in her mouth and bit it, then crawled towards him with it clutched in her jaws. When she

stretched forward, pulled a face and giggled, the toy fell out of her mouth. With some difficulty she found it again and went right up to him holding it in her hand, then pulled herself up to the arm of the sofa and stood beside him, wobbly but pleased with her achievement.

He took the object from her and examined it. The baby looked at him in confusion, then started screaming for all she was worth. It did not take long for him to realise that he was holding a human bone – a rib, ten centimetres long. It was off white in colour and worn smooth where it had broken so the edges were no longer sharp, and inside the break were brown blotches, like dirt.

He guessed that it was the front of the rib and saw that it was quite old.

When the mother heard the baby crying, she looked into the sitting room and saw her standing at the sofa beside the stranger. She put down the bowl of popcorn, went over to her daughter, picked her up and looked at the man, who seemed oblivious both to her and to the screaming baby.

"What happened?" the mother asked anxiously as she tried to comfort her child. She raised her voice in an effort to shout over the noisy boys.

The man looked up, got slowly to his feet and handed the mother the bone.

"Where did she get this?" he asked.

"What?" she said.

"This bone," he said. "Where did she get this bone?"

"Bone?" the mother said. When the girl saw the bone again she calmed down and made a grab for it, cross-eyed with concentration, more drool dangling from her gaping mouth. The baby snatched the bone and examined it in her hands.

"I think that's a bone," the man said.

The baby put it in her mouth and calmed down again.

"The thing she's gnawing," he said. "I think it's a human bone."

The mother looked at her baby chomping on the bone.

"I've never seen it before. What do you mean, a human bone?"

"I think it's part of a human rib," he said. "I'm a medical student," he added by way of explanation, "in my fifth year."

"Rubbish! Did you bring it with you?"

"Me? No. Do you know where it came from?" he asked.

The mother looked at her baby, then jerked the bone out of its mouth and threw it on the floor. Once again, the baby broke into a wail. The man picked up the bone to examine it more closely.

"Her brother might know ..."

He looked at the mother, who looked back awkwardly. She looked at her crying daughter. Then at the bone, and then through the sitting-room window at the half-built houses all around, then back at the bone and the stranger, and finally at her son, who came running in from one of the children's bedrooms.

"Tóti!" she called out. The boy ignored her. She waded into the crowd of children, pulled her son out with considerable difficulty and stood him in front of the medical student.

"Is this yours?" he asked the boy, handing him the bone.

"I found it," Tóti said. He didn't want to miss any of his birthday party.

"Where?" his mother asked. She put the baby down on the floor and it stared up at her, uncertain whether to begin howling again.

"Outside," the boy said. "It's a funny stone. I washed it." He was panting for breath. A drop of sweat trickled down his cheek.

"Outside where?" his mother asked. "When? What were you doing?"

The boy looked at his mother. He did not know whether he'd done anything wrong, but the look on her face suggested as much, and he wondered what it could be.

"Yesterday, I think," he said. "In the foundations at the end of the road. What's up?"

His mother and the stranger looked each other in the eye.

"Could you show me exactly where you found it?" she asked.

"Do I have to? It's my birthday party," he said.

"Yes," his mother said. "Show us."

She snatched up her baby from the floor and pushed her son out of the room in the direction of the front door. The man followed close behind. The children fell silent when their host was grounded and they watched his mother push Tóti out of the house with a stern look on her face, holding his little sister on her arm. They looked at each other, then set off after them.

This was in the new estate by the road up to Lake Reynisvatn. The Millennium Quarter. It was built on the slopes of Grafarholt hill, on top of which the monstrous brown-painted geothermal water tanks towered like a citadel over the suburb. Roads had been cleared up the slope on either side of the tanks and a succession of houses was being built along them, the occasional one already sporting a garden, freshly laid turf and saplings that would eventually grow and provide shade for their owners.

The throng set off in hot pursuit behind Tóti along the uppermost street next to the tanks. Newly built town houses stretched out into the grassland, while in the distance to the north and east the old summer chalets owned by people from Reykjavík took over. As in all new estates, the children played in the half-built houses, climbed up the scaffolding, hid in the shadows of solitary walls, or slid down into recently dug foundations to splash in the water that collected there.

Tóti led the stranger, his mother and the whole flock down into one such foundation and pointed out where he had found the strange white stone that was so light and smooth that he put it in his pocket and decided to keep it. The boy remembered the precise location, jumped down into the foundation ahead of them and went straight over to where it had lain in the dry earth. His mother ordered him to keep away, and with the young man's help she clambered down into the foundation. Tóti took the bone from her and placed it in the soil.

"It was lying like this," he said, still imagining the bone to be an interesting stone.

It was a Friday afternoon and no-one was working in the foundation. Timber had been put in place on two sides to prepare for concreting, but the earth was exposed where there were still no walls. The young man went up to the wall of dirt and scrutinised the place above where the boy had found the bone. He scraped at the dirt with his fingers and was horrified to see what looked like the bone of an upper arm buried deep in the ground.

The boy's mother watched the young man staring at the wall of dirt and followed his gaze until she too saw the bone. Moving closer, she thought she could make out a jawbone and one or two teeth.

She gave a start, looked back at the young man and then at her daughter, and instinctively started wiping the baby's mouth.

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She hardly realised what had happened until she felt the pain in her temple. Out of the blue, he had struck her head with his clenched fist, so fast that she did not see it coming. Or perhaps she did not believe he had hit her. This was the first punch, and in the years that followed she would wonder if her life could have been different had she walked out on him there and then.

If he had allowed her to.

She looked at him in astonishment, at a loss as to why he suddenly struck her. No-one had ever hit her before. It was three months after their wedding.

"Did you punch me?" she said, putting her hand to her temple.

"Do you think I didn't see the way you were looking at him?" he hissed.

"Him? What ...? Do you mean Snorri? Looking at Snorri?"

"Don't you think I didn't notice? How you acted like you were on heat?"

She had never seen this side to him before. Never heard him use that expression. On heat. What was he talking about? She had exchanged a few quick words with Snorri at the basement door, to thank him for returning something she forgot to take from the house where she had been working as a maid; she did not want to invite him in because her husband, who had been peevish all day, said he did not want to see him. Snorri made a joke about the merchant she used to work for, they laughed and said goodbye.

"It was only Snorri," she said. "Don't act like that. Why have you been in such a foul mood all day?"

"Are you contradicting me?" he asked, approaching her again. "I saw you through the window. Saw you dancing round him. Like a slut!"

"No, you can't ..."

He hit her in the face again with his clenched fist, sending her flying into the crockery cupboard in the kitchen. It happened so quickly that she did not have time to shield her head with her hands.

"Don't go lying to me!" he shouted. "I saw the way you were looking at him. I saw you flirting with him! Saw it with my own eyes! You filthy cunt!"

Another expression she heard him use for the first time.

"My God," she said. Blood trickled into her mouth from her split upper lip. The taste mingled with the salty tears running down her face. "Why did you do that? What have I done?"

He stood over her, poised to attack. His red face burned with wrath. He gnashed his teeth and stamped his foot, then swung round and strode out of the basement. She was left standing there, unable to fathom what had happened.

Later she often thought back to that moment and whether anything would have changed if she had tried to answer his violence immediately by leaving him, walking out on him for good, instead of just finding reasons for self-accusation. She must have done something to produce such a reaction. Something that she might be unaware of, but which he saw, and she could talk to him about it when he came back, promise to make amends and everything would return to normal.

She had never seen him behave like that, neither with her nor anyone else. He was a quiet person with a serious side. A brooder, even. That was one thing she liked about him when they were getting to know each other. He worked in Kjós for the brother of the merchant who employed her, and he delivered goods to him. That was how they met almost a year and a half ago. They were roughly the same age and he talked about giving up labouring and maybe going to sea. There was money to be had from fishing. And he wanted his own house. Be his own master. Labouring was repressive, old-fashioned and ill-paid.

She told him she was bored in service for the merchant. The man was a miser who was always groping at the three girls he employed; his wife was an old hag and a slave-driver. She had no particular plans about what to do. Had never thought about the future. Toil was all she had ever known since her earliest childhood. Her life was not much more than that.

He kept finding excuses for visiting the merchant and frequently called on her in the kitchen. One thing led to another and she soon told him about her child. He said he knew she was a mother. He had asked people about her. This was the first time he revealed an interest in getting to know her better. The girl would soon be three years old, she told him, and fetched her from the backyard where she was playing with the merchant's children.

He asked how many men there were in her life when she came back with her daughter, smiling as if it was an innocent joke. Later he mercilessly used her alleged promiscuity to break her down. He never called the daughter by her name, only nicknames: called her a bastard and a cripple.

She had never had many men in her life. She told him about the father of her child, a fisherman who had drowned in Kollafjöldur. He was only 22 when the crew of four perished in a storm at sea. Around the time she found out that she was pregnant. They were not married, so she could hardly be described as a widow. They had planned to marry, but he died and left her with a child born out of wedlock.

While he sat in the kitchen listening, she noticed that the girl did not want to be with him. Normally she was not shy, but she clutched her mother's skirt and did not dare let go when he called her over. He took a boiled sweet out of his pocket and handed it to her, but she just buried her face deeper against her mother's skirt and started to cry, she wanted to go back out with the other children. Boiled sweets were her favourite treat.

Two months later he asked her to marry him. There was none of the romance to it that she had read about. They had met several times in the evening and walked around town or gone to a Chaplin film. Laughing heartily at the little tramp, she looked at her escort. He did not even smile. One evening after they left the cinema and she was waiting with him for the lift he had arranged back to Kjós, he asked her out of the blue whether they shouldn't get married. He pulled her towards him.

"I want us to get married," he said.

In spite of everything, she was so surprised that she did not remember until much later, really when it was all over, that this was not a marriage proposal, not a question about what she wanted.

"I want us to get married."