

PROLOGUE

THEY SAID I MUST DIE. They said that I stole the breath from men, and now they must steal mine. I imagine, then, that we are all candle flames, greasy-bright, fluttering in the darkness and the howl of the wind, and in the stillness of the room I hear footsteps, awful coming footsteps, coming to blow me out and send my life up away from me in a grey wreath of smoke. I will vanish into the air and the night. They will blow us all out, one by one, until it is only their own light by which they see themselves. Where will I be then?

Sometimes I think I see it again, the farm, burning in the dark. Sometimes I can feel the ache of winter in my lungs, and I think I see the flames mirrored in the ocean, the water so strange, so flickered with light. There was a moment during that night when I looked back. I looked back to watch the fire, and if I lick my skin I can still taste the salt. The smoke.

It wasn't always so cold.

I hear footsteps.

CHAPTER ONE

Public Notice

THERE WILL BE AN AUCTION on the 24th of March 1828, at Illugastadir, for the valuables the farmer Natan Ketilsson has left behind. There is one cow, a few horses, a considerable amount of sheep, hay and furniture, a saddle, a bridle, and many dishes and plates. All this will be sold if a decent offer is presented. All valuables will be awarded to the highest bidder. If the auction is not possible due to bad weather, it will be cancelled and held the next day, weather allowing.

DISTRICT COMMISSIONER
Björn Blöndal

20th of March 1828

To the Very Reverend Jóhann Tómasson,

Thank you for your worthy letter from the 14th, where you wished to be informed of how we attended to the burial of Pétur Jónsson from Geitaskard, who is said to have been murdered and burned on the night between the 13th and the 14th of this month, with Natan Ketilsson. As my Reverend is aware, there was some deliberation over whether his bones should be buried in consecrated ground. His conviction and punishment for robbery, theft, and receiving stolen property was to follow after his prosecution in the Supreme Court. However, we have not had any letters from Denmark. The Land Court judge convicted Pétur on the 5th of February last year, and sentenced him to four years of hard labour in the Rasphus in Copenhagen, but at the time of his murder he was on 'free foot'. Therefore, in answer to your enquiry, his bones were buried with Christian rites, alongside Natan's, as he could not yet be thought of as belonging to those outside the Christian way. These people are expressly defined in the letter from His Majesty the King on the 30th of December 1740, which lists all persons who shall not be permitted Christian burial rites.

DISTRICT COMMISSIONER

Björn Blöndal

30th of May 1829

Rev. T. Jónsson

Breidabólstadir, Vesturhóp

To the Assistant Reverend Thorvardur Jónsson,

I trust this letter finds you well and thriving in your administration of the Lord's work in Vesturhóp.

Firstly, I wish to extend to you my congratulations, however belatedly, for the successful completion of your studies in the south of Iceland. Your parishioners say that you are a diligent young man, and I approve of your decision to repair to the north to begin your chaplaincy under the supervision of your father. It is of considerable joy to me to know that there remain righteous men willing to fulfil their duties to man and God.

Secondly, I, in my capacity as District Commissioner, write to you in request of service. As you will be aware, our community has recently been darkened by the shadow of crime. The Illugastadir murders, committed last year, have in their heinousness emblematised the corruption and ungodliness of this county. As District Commissioner for Húnavatn, I cannot abide societal waywardness and, after the anticipated authorisation from the Supreme Court in Copenhagen, I intend to execute the Illugastadir murderers. It is with this event in mind that I ask for your assistance, Assistant Reverend Thorvardur.

As you will recall, I related the event of the murders in a letter circulated to the clergy almost ten months ago, with orders that sermons of chastisement be delivered. Allow me to repeat what occurred, this time to provide you with a more invested consideration of the crime.

Last year, on the night between the 13th and 14th of March, three people committed a severe and loathsome act against two men, with whom you may be familiar: Natan Ketilsson and Pétur Jónsson. Pétur and Natan were found in the burnt ruins of Natan's farm, Illugastadir, and a closer examination of their corpses revealed wounds of a deliberately inflicted nature. This discovery led to an enquiry, and from there a trial ensued. On the 2nd of July last year the three persons charged with these murders – one man and two women – were found guilty in the District Court, presided over by myself, and sentenced to be beheaded: 'He that Smiteth a Man so that he Die, shall be surely put to Death.' The death sentences were upheld in the Land Court on the 27th of October last year, which met in Reykjavík. The case is currently being tried in Copenhagen's Supreme Court, and it is likely that my original judgment will stand there also. The name of the convicted man is Fridrik Sigurdsson, the son of the farmer at Katadalur. The women are workmaids, named Sigríður Gudmundsdóttir and Agnes Magnúsdóttir.

These convicted persons are currently held in custody here in the north, and will be until the time of their execution. Fridrik Sigurdsson has been taken into Thingeyrar by Reverend Jóhann Tómasson, and Sigríður Gudmundsdóttir was removed to Midhóp. Agnes Magnúsdóttir was to be kept until her execution at Stóra-Borg, but for reasons which I am not at liberty to state, will be moved to a new holding at Kornsa in the valley of Vatnsdalur next month. She is discontented with her current

spiritual administrator, and has used one of her few remaining rights to request another priest. She has requested you, Assistant Reverend Thorvardur.

It is with some uncertainty that I approach you for this task. I am aware that your responsibilities have so far been confined to the spiritual education of your parish's youngest members, which is to say, of undoubted value, but it is of little political import. You may yourself admit that you are too pale in experience to know how to bring this condemned woman to the Lord and His infinite mercy, in which case I would not protest your disinclination. It is a weight that I would hesitate to bestow on the shoulders of experienced clergymen.

Should you, however, accept the responsibility of preparing Agnes Magnúsdóttir for her meeting with our Lord, you will be obliged to visit Kornsa regularly when the weather allows. You must administer God's word and inspire repentance and an acknowledgement of Justice. Please do not let flattery influence your decision, nor kinship, if any resides between you and the convicted. In all things, Reverend, if you cannot construct your own counsel, seek mine.

I await word of your response. Please provide my messenger with such.

DISTRICT COMMISSIONER

Björn Blöndal

ASSISTANT REVEREND THORVÁRDUR JÓNSSON WAS inside the small farmstead adjoined to the church of Breidabólstadur, repairing the hearth with new stones, when he heard his father clear his throat in the doorway.

‘There’s a messenger from Hvammur outside, Tóti. He’s asking for you.’

‘For me?’ In his surprise he let a rock slip out of his hand. It dropped to the packed earth floor, narrowly missing his foot. Reverend Jón sucked his teeth in annoyance, ducked his head under the doorframe and gently pushed Tóti out of the way.

‘Yes, for you. He’s waiting.’

The messenger was a servant, dressed in a worn coat. He gave Tóti a long look before speaking. ‘Reverend Thorvardur Jónsson?’

‘That’s me. Greetings. Well, I’m an Assistant Reverend.’

The servant shrugged. ‘I have a letter for you from the District Commissioner, the Honourable Björn Blöndal.’ He pulled a small slip of paper out from the inside of his coat, and gave it to Tóti. ‘I’ve orders to wait here while you read it.’

The letter was warm and damp from sitting inside the servant’s clothes. Tóti broke the seal and, noting that it had been written that same day, sat on the chopping block outside the doorway and began to read.

When he finished Blöndal's letter, he looked up and noticed the servant watching him. 'Well?' the servant prompted, with a raised eyebrow.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Your response for the District Commissioner? I don't have all day.'

'May I talk with my father?'

The servant sighed. 'Go on then.'

He found his father in the badstofa, slowly smoothing the blankets upon his bed.

'Yes?'

'It's from the District Commissioner.' Tóti offered his father the unfolded letter and waited as he read it, unsure of what to do.

His father's face was impassive as he folded the letter and handed it back. He didn't say anything.

'What should I say?' Tóti asked, finally.

'That's your choice.'

'I don't know her.'

'No.'

'She's not in our parish?'

'No.'

'Why has she asked for me? I'm only an Assistant Reverend.'

His father turned back to his bed. 'Perhaps you ought to address that question to her.'

The servant was sitting on the chopping block, cleaning his nails with a knife. 'Well now. What response am I to give the District Commissioner from the *Assistant* Reverend?'

Tóti replied before he knew his decision. 'Tell Blöndal that I will meet with Agnes Magnúsdóttir.'

The servant's eyes widened. 'Is *that* what this is all about then?'

'I'm to be her spiritual advisor.'

The servant gaped at him, and then suddenly laughed. ‘Good Lord,’ he muttered. ‘They pick a mouse to tame a cat.’ And with that he mounted his horse and vanished behind the swell of hills, leaving Tóti standing still, holding the letter away from him as though it were about to catch fire.



STEINA JÓNSDÓTTIR WAS PILING DRIED dung in the yard outside her family’s turf croft when she heard the rapid cllop of horses’ hooves. Rubbing mud off her skirts, she stood and peered around the side of the hovel to better see the riding track that ran through the valley. A man in a bright red coat was approaching. She watched him turn towards the farm and, fighting a flicker of panic at the realisation she would have to greet him, retreated back around the croft, where she hurriedly spat on her hands to clean them and wiped her nose on her sleeve. When she returned to the yard, the rider was waiting.

‘Hello, young lady.’ The man looked down at Steina and her filthy skirts with an air of bemusement. ‘I see I have interrupted you at your chores.’ Steina stared as he dismounted, gracefully swinging his leg over his horse. For a large man he landed lightly on his feet. ‘Do you know who I am?’ He looked at her for a glimmer of recognition.

Steina shook her head.

‘I am the District Commissioner, Björn Audunsson Blöndal.’ He gave her a little nod of his head and adjusted his coat, which, Steina noticed, was trimmed with silver buttons.

‘You’re from Hvammur,’ she murmured.

Blöndal smiled patiently. ‘Yes. I am your father’s overseer. I have come to speak with him.’

‘He’s not home.’

Blöndal frowned. ‘And your mother?’

‘They’re visiting folks down south in the valley.’

‘I see.’ He looked fixedly at the young woman, who squirmed and cast her eyes nervously to the fields. A smattering of freckles across her nose and forehead interrupted what was otherwise pale skin. Her eyes were brown and widely set, and there was a large gap between her front teeth. There was something rather ungainly about her, Blöndal decided. He noted the thick crescents of dirt under her fingernails.

‘You’ll have to come back later,’ Steina finally suggested.

Blöndal tensed. ‘May I at least come inside?’

‘Oh. If you want. You can tie your horse there.’ Steina bit her lip while Blöndal wound his reins through a post in the yard, and then she turned and almost ran inside.

Blöndal followed her, stooping under the low entrance to the croft. ‘Will your father return this day?’

‘No,’ was the curt reply.

‘How unfavourable,’ Blöndal complained, stumbling in the dark passageway as Steina led him through to the badstofa. He had grown corpulent since his posting as District Commissioner and was accustomed to the more spacious dwelling provided for him and his family at Hvammur, built from imported wood. The hovels of the peasants and farmers had begun to repel him, with their cramped rooms constructed of turf that issued clouds of dust in the summer, irritating his lungs.

‘Commissioner —’

‘District Commissioner.’

‘I’m sorry, District Commissioner. Mamma and Pabbi, I mean, Margrét and Jón, will return tomorrow. Or the next day. Depending on the weather.’ Steina gestured towards the nearest end of the narrow room, where a grey woollen curtain served as a partition between the badstofa and a tiny parlour. ‘Sit in there,’ she said. ‘I’ll go find my sister.’

Lauga Jónsdóttir, Steina's younger sister, was weeding the meagre vegetable plot at a little distance from the croft. Bent over her task, she hadn't seen the District Commissioner arrive, but she heard her sister calling long before she came into sight.

'Lauga! Where are you? Lauga!'

Lauga rose to her feet and wiped her soiled hands on her apron. She didn't shout back to her sister, but waited patiently until Steina, running and tripping over her long skirts, spotted her.

'I've been looking everywhere for you!' Steina cried, out of breath.

'What on God's earth is wrong with you?'

'The Commissioner is here!'

'Who?'

'Blöndal!'

Lauga stared at her sister. 'District Commissioner Björn Blöndal? Wipe your nose, Steina, you're snotting.'

'He's sitting in the parlour.'

'Where?'

'You know, behind the curtain.'

'You left him there *by himself*? ' Lauga's eyes grew wide.

Steina grimaced. 'Please come and talk to him.'

Lauga glared at her sister, then quickly untied her dirty apron and dropped it beside the lovage. 'I can't think of what goes through your head sometimes, Steina,' she muttered, as they walked quickly towards the croft. 'Leaving a man like Blöndal twiddling his thumbs in our badstofa.'

'In the parlour.'

'What difference does it make? I suppose you gave him the servants' whey to drink, too.'

Steina turned to her sister with a panicked expression. 'I didn't give him anything.'

'Steina!' Lauga broke into a little trot. 'He'll think us peasants!'

Steina watched her sister pick her way through the tussocks of grass. 'We *are* peasants,' she mumbled.

Lauga quickly washed her face and hands, and snatched a new apron from Kristín, the family's workmaid, who had hidden herself in the kitchen at the sound of a stranger's voice. Lauga found the District Commissioner seated at the little wooden table in the parlour, reading over a slip of paper. Expressing apologies for her sister's discourteous reception, she offered him a plate of cold, hashed mutton, which he took gladly, albeit with a slightly injured air. She quietly stood aside as he ate, watching his fleshy lips wrap about the meat. Perhaps her Pabbi was to be promoted from District Officer to an even greater title. Perhaps he would receive a uniform, or a stipend from the Danish Crown. There might be new dresses. A new home. More servants.

Blöndal scraped his knife across the plate.

'Would you like some skyr and cream, District Commissioner?' she asked, taking the empty dish.

Blöndal waved his hands in front of his chest as if to decline, then paused. 'Well, all right then. Thank you.'

Lauga blushed and turned to fetch the soft cheese.

'And I would not object to coffee,' he called after her as she ducked her head around the curtain.

'What does he want?' Steina asked, huddling by the fire in the kitchen. 'I can't hear anything except you, clomping up and down the corridor.'

Lauga shoved the dirty plate at her. 'He hasn't said anything yet. He wants skyr and coffee.'

Steina exchanged looks with Kristín, who rolled her eyes. 'We have no coffee,' Steina said quietly.

‘Yes we do. I saw some in the pantry last week.’

Steina hesitated. ‘I ... I drank it.’

‘Steina! The coffee isn’t for us! We save it for occasions!’

‘Occasions? The Commissioner never visits.’

‘The *District* Commissioner, Steina!’

‘The servants are coming back from Reykjavík soon. We might have more then.’

‘That’s then. What are we going to do now?’ Exasperated, Lauga pushed Kristín in the direction of the pantry. ‘Skr and cream! Hurry.’

‘I wanted to know what it tasted like,’ Steina offered.

‘It’s too late. Bring him some fresh milk instead. Bring everything in when it’s ready. Actually no, let Kristín. You look like you’ve been rolling in the dirt with the horses.’ Lauga shot a scathing look at the dung on Steina’s clothes and walked back down the corridor.

Blöndal was waiting for her. ‘Young lady. I suppose you are wondering at my occasioning your family with a visit.’

‘My name is Sigurlaug. Or Lauga, if you like.’

‘Quite. Sigurlaug.’

‘Is it some business of my father’s? He is –’

‘Southbound, yes, I know. Your sister told me, and ... Oh look, here she is.’

Lauga turned and saw Steina emerging round the side of the partition, carrying the soft cheese, cream and berries in one grimy hand, and the milk in the other. Lauga gave her sister a vexed look as Steina accidentally dragged the edge of the curtain through the skyr. Fortunately the District Commissioner seemed oblivious.

‘Sir,’ Steina mumbled. She set the bowl and cup on the table in front of him, and then gave an awkward curtsy. ‘May it do you good.’

‘Thank you,’ Blöndal replied. He sniffed the skyr appraisingly, then looked up at the two sisters. He smiled thinly. ‘Who is the elder?’

Lauga nudged Steina to prompt her, but she remained silent, gaping at the brilliant red of the man’s coat.

‘I am younger, District Commissioner,’ Lauga said eventually, smiling to show off her dimples. ‘By one year. Steinvör is twenty-one this month.’

‘Everyone calls me Steina.’

‘You are both very pretty,’ Blöndal said.

‘Thank you, sir.’ Lauga nudged Steina again.

‘Thank you,’ Steina mumbled.

‘Both have your father’s fair hair, though I see you have your mother’s blue eyes,’ he said, nodding at Lauga. He pushed the untouched bowl towards her and took up the milk. He sniffed it and set it down on the table again.

‘Please, sir, eat,’ Lauga said, motioning to the bowl.

‘Thank you, but I am suddenly sated.’ Blöndal reached into his coat pocket. ‘Now, I would have preferred to discuss this with the master of the house, but as District Officer Jón isn’t here and this cannot wait until his return, I see I must tell his daughters.’ He took up his sheet of paper and unfolded it upon the table for them to read.

‘I trust that you are familiar with the event that occurred at Illugastadir last year?’ he asked.

Steina flinched. ‘Do you mean the murders?’

Lauga nodded, her blue eyes wide with sudden solemnity. ‘The trial was held at your home.’

Blöndal inclined his head. ‘Yes. The murders of Natan Ketilsson the herbalist and Pétur Jónsson. As this most unfortunate and grievous tragedy occurred within the Húnavatn District, it was my responsibility to work with the magistrate and Land Court

in Reykjavík to come to some sort of arrangement regarding the persons accused.'

Lauga picked up the paper and walked to the window to read by its light. 'So it is all over.'

'On the contrary. The three accused were last October found guilty of both murder and arson in the court of this country. The case has now proceeded to the *Supreme* Court in Copenhagen, Denmark. The King ...' and here Blöndal paused for effect '... The King himself must learn of the crime, and agree with *my* original sentence of execution. As you can read for yourself, they have each received a capital sentence. It is a victory for justice, as I am sure you will agree.'

Lauga nodded absently, still reading. 'They're not being sent to Denmark?'

Blöndal smiled, and swung back on the wooden chair, lifting the heels of his boots off the ground. 'No.'

Lauga looked up at him, puzzled. 'Then, sir, excuse my ignorance, but where are they to be ...?' Her voice trailed off.

Blöndal scraped back his chair and rose to stand next to her at the window, ignoring Steina. He peered out through the dried sheep's bladder that had been pulled across to serve as a pane, noticing a small vein twisted in its dull surface. He shuddered. His own house had glass windows.

'They shall be executed here,' he said finally. 'In Iceland. In the north of Iceland, to be exact. I and the magistrate who presided at Reykjavík decided it would be ...' He hesitated, deliberating. 'More economical.'

'Really?'

Blöndal frowned at Steina, who was eyeing him with suspicion. She reached over and plucked the slip of paper out of Lauga's hand.

'Yes, although I will not deny that the execution also brings with it an opportunity for our community to witness the consequences for

grave misdemeanour. It requires careful handling. As you are aware, clever Sigurlaug, criminals of this stature are usually sent abroad for their punishment, where there are gaolhouses and the like. As it has been decided that the three will be executed in Iceland, in the same district in which they undertook their crime, we are in need of some sort of custodial holding until the date and place of execution have been agreed upon.

‘As you well know, we have no factories, no public house in Húnavatn that we may use to accommodate prisoners.’ Blöndal turned and eased himself back into the chair. ‘This is why I decided that they should be placed on farms, homes of upright Christians, who would inspire repentance by good example, and who would benefit from the work these prisoners do as they await their judgment.’

Blöndal leaned across the table towards Steina, who stared at him, one hand over her mouth and the other clutching the letter. ‘Icelanders,’ he continued, ‘who would be able to fulfil their duties as government officials by providing this accommodation.’

Lauga looked at the District Commissioner in bewilderment. ‘Can’t they be placed in holdings at Reykjavík?’ she whispered.

‘No. There are costs.’ He waved his hand in the air.

Steina’s eyes narrowed. ‘You’re putting them *here*? With us? Because the court in Reykjavík wants to avoid the cost of sending them abroad?’

‘Steina,’ Lauga warned.

‘Your family will be compensated,’ Blöndal said, frowning.

‘What are we supposed to do? Chain them to our bedposts?’

Blöndal slowly rose to his full height. ‘I have no choice,’ he said, his voice suddenly low and dangerous. ‘Your father’s title comes with responsibility. I’m sure he would not question me. Kornsa has too few hands to work it, and there is the issue of your family’s financial state.’ He approached Steina, looking down at her small, dirty face in

the dim light. ‘Besides, Steinvör, I will not suffer you and your family to hold all three convicts. It is only one of the women.’ He placed a heavy hand upon her shoulder, ignoring the way she recoiled. ‘You’re not afraid of your own sex now, are you?’

After Blöndal had left, Steina returned to the parlour and picked up the uneaten bowl of skyr. Cream had congealed at its rim. She shook with frustration and rage, and pressed the bowl hard into the table, biting her bottom lip. She screamed silently, willing the bowl to break, until the flood of anger passed. Then she returned to the kitchen.



THERE ARE TIMES WHEN I wonder whether I’m not already dead. This is no life; waiting in darkness, in silence, in a room so squalid I have forgotten the smell of fresh air. The chamber pot is so full of my waste that it threatens to spill if someone does not come and empty it soon.

When did they last come? It is all one long night now.

In the winter it was better. In the winter the Stóra-Borg folk were as imprisoned as I; we all shared the badstofa when the snow stormed the croft. They had lamps for the waking hours, and when the oil ran out, candles to keep the darkness at bay. Then spring came and they moved me to the storeroom. They left me alone without a light and there was no means to measure the hours, no way to mark the day from night. Now I keep company with only the fetters about my wrists, the dirt floor, a dismantled loom, abandoned in the corner, an old broken handspindle.

Perhaps it is already summer. I can hear the footsteps of servants patter along the corridor, the creak of a door as they go to and fro. Sometimes I hear the shrill, piping laughter of workmaids as they chat together outside, and I know that the weather has eased, that

the wind has lost its teeth. And I close my eyes and I imagine the valley in the long days of summer, the sun warming the bones of the earth until the swans flock to the lake, and the clouds lifting to reveal the height of the sky: bright, bright blue, so bright you could weep.



THREE DAYS AFTER BJÖRN BLÖNDAL visited the daughters of Kornsó, their father, the District Officer of Vatnsdalur, Jón Jónsson, and his wife Margrét, set out for home.

Jón, a slightly stooped, wiry man of fifty-five winters, with snow-blond hair and large ears that made him appear simple-minded, walked in front of their horse, leading it by the reins and stepping over the uneven ground with practised ease. His wife, sitting atop their black mare, was wearied by their journey, although she would not have admitted it. She sat with her chin slightly raised, her head propped up by a thin, tremulous neck. The glance of her hooded eyes skipped from farm to farm as they passed the small homesteads of the Vatnsdalur valley, closing only when she suffered fits of coughing. When these subsided she would lean over the horse to spit, then wipe her mouth with a corner of her shawl, muttering a short prayer. Her husband occasionally inclined his head towards her when she did so, as if vaguely concerned she might topple off the horse, but otherwise they continued travelling uninterrupted.

Margrét, having just exhausted herself with another racking bark, spat onto the grass and pressed her palms against her chest until she got her breath back. Her voice, when she spoke, was hoarse.

‘See now, Jón, the folks of Ás have another cow.’

‘Hmm?’ Her husband was lost in his thoughts.

‘I said,’ Margrét remarked, clearing her throat, ‘the folks of Ás have another cow.’

‘Is that so?’

‘I’m surprised you didn’t notice it yourself.’

‘Right.’

Margrét blinked against the dusty light, and made out the vague shape of the Kornsó croft in the distance ahead.

‘Nearly home.’

Her husband grunted his agreement.

‘Makes you think, doesn’t it, Jón? We could do with another cow.’

‘We could do with many more things.’

‘Another cow would be nice though. The extra butter. We could afford another hand for harvest.’

‘In good time, Margrét, love.’

‘In good time I’ll be dead.’

The words came out more bitterly than she intended. Jón didn’t reply, only murmured to their horse to urge it onwards, and Margrét frowned at the back of his riding hat, willing him to turn around. When he kept plodding onwards, she took a deep breath and again peered towards Kornsó.

It was late afternoon and the light was fading across the hayfields, eased out of the sky by low clouds gathering in the east. Patches of old snow upon the mountain ridge looked by turns dull and grey, and then, as the clouds shifted, a startling white. Summer birds darted across the hayfields to catch the insects that quavered above them and the querulous bleats of sheep could be heard, as young boys drove them down the valley towards the farmsteads.

At Kornsó, Lauga and Steina stepped out of the croft to collect water from the mountain stream, Lauga rubbing her eyes in the sunlight and Steina absently swinging her bucket against her side in time with her step. They were not speaking.

The two sisters had worked the past few days in complete silence, only addressing one another to request the spade, or to ask which barrel of salted cod ought to be opened first. The silence, which began after a row following the District Commissioner's visit, had been streaked with anger and anxiety. The effort of speaking as little to each other as possible had exhausted them both. Lauga, frustrated by her elder sister's stubbornness and awkwardness, could not stop thinking of what her parents would say about Blöndal's visit. Steina's ungracious reaction to the news delivered by Blöndal could affect their social standing. Björn Blöndal was a powerful man, and would not like to be challenged by a stripling of a girl. Didn't Steina know how much their family relied on Blöndal? How they would only be doing their duty?

Steina was trying to avoid thinking about the murderess at all. The crime itself made her feel sick, and remembering the callous manner in which the Commissioner had forced the criminal upon them made her throat seize up with fury. Lauga was the youngest, she should not be the one telling her what she should and should not do. How was she to know the ins and outs of social niceties one was obliged to perform for fat men in red jackets? No. It was better to not think of it at all.

Steina let the weight of her bucket pull her shoulder down and gave a great yawn. Beside her, Lauga couldn't help but yawn too, and for a brief moment they caught each other's eye and an understanding of shared fatigue passed between them, until Lauga's curt reminder to cover her mouth made Steina glower and glare at the ground.

The gentle beams of afternoon light were warm on their faces as they moved towards the stream. There was no wind, and the valley was so still that the two women began to walk more slowly to keep with the pause in the air. They were nearing the rocky outcrop surrounding the brook when Lauga, twisting around to pull her skirt off a thorn bush, noticed a horse in the distance.

‘Oh!’ she gasped.

Steina turned. ‘What is it now?’

Lauga nodded in the direction of the horse. ‘It’s Mamma and Pabbi,’ she said breathlessly. ‘They’ve returned.’ She squinted through the haze of sunlight across the fields. ‘Yes, it’s them,’ she said, as if to herself. Suddenly agitated, Lauga pushed her bucket at Steina and motioned for her to continue walking towards the stream. ‘Fill these. You can manage both, can’t you? It’s better if I ... I’ll go. To light the fire.’ She shoved Steina on the shoulder, harder than she intended, then turned on her heel.

The brambles along the path caught at Lauga’s stockings as she rushed back to the croft, overcome with relief. Now Pabbi could deal with the District Commissioner and Agnes Magnúsdóttir.

Pushing open the door to the farmhouse, Lauga made her way down the corridor and turned left into the kitchen. In the absence of her mistress, Kristín had taken the afternoon off to visit her family, but the hearth was still smoking from that morning’s fire. Lauga quickly heaped it with dried dung, almost suffocating the flames that crept up in her rush. How would her father react to news of the District Commissioner’s visit? How long would the prisoner be kept at Kornsó? She didn’t even have the letter he had shown her; Steina had thrown it on the fire during their quarrel.

Still, Lauga thought, placing a pot on a hook above the flames, once Pabbi knew, he would take charge.

She stoked the hearth with a little air from the bellows, and then quickly trotted down the corridor to poke her head outside the door. Another thrill of panic ran down her spine. What *would* he do? She ducked her head back inside and went into the pantry to gather what she could for a broth. There was only a little barley left. They were still waiting for the farmhands to return from the merchants in the south.

Lauga stepped across the doorway, nearly tripping on the raised ledge, and went into the storeroom to fetch a little mutton for the pot. There was no point cutting down any smoked lamb at this time of year, but there was a slice or two of blood sausage left from the winter, very sour but good.

We'll eat together in the badstofa. I'll tell them then, Lauga decided. She heard the sounds of the horse's hooves in the dirt of the yard outside.

'*Komið þið sæll!*' Lauga stepped out of the croft, brushing the dust from the dung off her hands, and quickly smoothing her hair back under her cap. 'Good to see you both safely returned.'

Jón, her father, slowed the horse to a stop and gave her a smile from under his riding hat. He raised a bare hand in greeting and stepped forward to give her a quick, formal kiss.

'Little Lauga. How have you managed?' He turned to the horse to unload a few parcels fastened on its back.

'Hello, Mamma.'

Margrét glanced down at Lauga and gave her a warm look, although her lips barely moved. 'Hello, Sigurlaug,' she said.

'You look well.'

'I'm still alive,' she replied.

'Are you tired?'

Margrét ignored the question and slid awkwardly to the ground. Lauga embraced her mother shyly, then ran her hand over the mare's nose and felt the nostrils quiver, the hot, wet breath on her palm.

'Where's your sister?'

Lauga glanced at the outcrop where the stream was, but could see no movement. 'Fetching water for supper.'

Margrét raised her eyebrows. 'I thought she'd be here to welcome us.'

Lauga turned again to her father, who was placing the small

packages from the saddle on the ground. She took a deep breath. 'Pabbi, there is something I have to tell you later.'

He began to untie the stiff rope from about the mare. 'A death?' 'What?'

'Have we lost any animals?'

'Oh. Oh no, nothing like that,' Lauga answered, adding, 'Thank the Lord,' as an afterthought. She stepped closer to her father. 'I might need to tell you this alone,' she said in a low voice.

Her mother heard her. 'What you have to say can be told to the both of us, Lauga.'

'I don't want to distress you, Mamma.'

'Oh, I am often distressed,' Margrét said, suddenly smiling. 'It comes from having children and servants to look after.' Then, telling her husband to make sure he didn't set the remaining parcels down in puddles, Margrét picked up some packages and headed inside, Lauga following after her.

Jón had entered the badstofa and eased himself down next to his wife by the time Lauga brought in the bowls of broth.

'I thought a hot meal might be of comfort,' she said.

Jón looked up at Lauga, who was standing in front of him, holding the tray. 'May I change out of these clothes first?'

Lauga hesitated, and, setting the tray down on the bed beside her mother, dropped to her knees and began to untie the binds about Jón's shoes. 'There is something I have to tell you both.'

'Where's Kristín?' Margrét asked sharply, as Jón leant back on his elbows and let his daughter work the damp sock off his foot.

'Steina gave her half the day in holiday,' Lauga replied.

'And where is Steina?'

'Oh, I don't know. Here somewhere.' Lauga felt her stomach

twist in panic, aware of the scrutiny of her parents. ‘Pabbi, District Commissioner Blöndal paid a visit when you were away,’ she whispered.

Jón sat up a little and looked down at his daughter. ‘The District Commissioner?’ he repeated.

Margrét clenched her fists. ‘What did he want?’ she asked.

‘He had a letter for you, Pabbi.’

Margrét stared down at Lauga. ‘Why didn’t he send a servant? Are you sure it was Blöndal?’

‘Mamma, please.’

Jón was silent. ‘Where is the letter?’ he asked.

Lauga wriggled the shoe off his other foot and let it drop to the floor. Mud cracked off the leather.

‘Steina burnt it.’

‘Whatever for? Good Lord!’

‘Mamma! It’s all right. I know what it said. Pabbi, we are being forced to –’

‘Pabbi!’ Steina’s voice rang down the corridor. ‘You’ll never guess who we have to keep locked up in our house!’

‘Locked up?’ Margrét twisted around to query her elder daughter, who had just bounced into the room. ‘Oh, Steina, you’re sopping.’

Steina looked down at her soaked apron and shrugged. ‘I dropped the buckets and had to go back and fill them up again. Pabbi, Blöndal’s forcing us to keep Agnes Magnúsdóttir in our *home*!’

‘Agnes Magnúsdóttir?’ Margrét turned to Lauga, horrified.

‘Yes, the murderess, Mamma!’ Steina exclaimed, untying her wet apron and carelessly flinging it onto the bed next to her. ‘The one who killed Natan Ketilsson!’

‘Steina! I was just about to explain to Pabbi –’

‘And Pétur Jónsson, Mamma.’

‘Steina!’

‘Oh, Lauga, just because you wanted to tell them.’

‘You ought not to interrupt –’

‘Girls!’ Jón stood up, his arms outstretched. ‘Enough. Begin from the start, Lauga. What happened?’

Lauga hesitated, then told her parents everything she could remember about the District Commissioner’s visit, her face growing flushed as she recited what she recalled reading in the letter.

Before she had finished, Jón began to dress again.

‘Surely this is not something we are obliged to do!’ Margrét tugged at her husband’s sleeve, but Jón shrugged her off, refusing to look at his wife’s distraught face.

‘Jón,’ Margrét murmured. She glanced over at her daughters, who both sat with their hands in their laps, watching their parents silently.

Jón pulled his boots back on, whipping the ties around his ankle. The leather squeaked as he pulled them tight.

‘It’s too late, Jón,’ Margrét said. ‘Are you going to Hvammur? They’ll all be asleep.’

‘Then I’ll wake them.’ He picked up his riding hat from its nail, took his wife by the shoulders and gently shifted her out of his way. Nodding farewell to his daughters, he strode out of the room, down the corridor and shut the door to the croft behind him.

‘What shall we do, Mamma?’ Lauga’s small voice came from a dark corner of the room.

Margrét closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

Jón returned to Kornsó some hours later. Kristín, who had come back from her afternoon’s holiday to a sound chastising from Margrét, was scowling reproachfully at Steina. Margrét paused at her knitting and was considering whether or not to make peace between the girls,

when she heard the door to the croft creak open and the sound of her husband's heavy tread in the corridor.

Jón entered and immediately looked across at his wife. She clenched her jaw.

'Well?' Margrét ushered her husband to his bed.

Jón fumbled at the ties on his shoes.

'Please, Pabbi,' Lauga said, dropping to her knees. 'What did Blöndal say?' She jerked backwards as she pulled off his boots. 'Is she still to come here?'

Jón nodded. 'It's as Lauga said. Agnes Magnúsdóttir is to be moved from her holdings at Stóra-Borg and brought to us.'

'But why, Pabbi?' Lauga asked quietly. 'What did we do wrong?'

'We have done nothing wrong. I am a District Officer. She can't be placed with any family. She is a responsibility of the authorities, of which I am one.'

'Plenty of *authorities* at Stóra-Borg,' Margrét's tone was sour.

'She's to be moved nevertheless. There was an incident.'

'What happened?' Lauga asked.

Jón looked down at the fair face of his youngest child. 'I am sure it was nothing to worry about,' he said eventually.

Margrét gave a short laugh. 'Are we just going to yield to this? Like a dog rolling over?' Her voice dropped to a hiss. 'This Agnes is a *murderess*, Jón! We have our girls, our workmen. Even Kristín! We are responsible for others!'

Jón gave his wife a meaningful look. 'Blöndal means to compensate us, Margrét. There is remuneration for her custody.'

Margrét paused. When she spoke her voice was subdued. 'Perhaps we should send the girls away.'

'No, Mamma! I don't want to leave,' cried Steina.

'It would be for your own safety.'

Jón cleared his throat. 'The girls will be safe enough with you,

Margrét.’ He sighed. ‘There is another thing. Björn Blöndal has requested my presence at Hvammur on the night the woman arrives here.’

Margrét opened her mouth in dismay. ‘You mean to make *me* meet her?’

‘Pabbi, you can’t leave Mamma alone with her,’ Lauga cried.

‘She won’t be alone. You will all be here. There will be officers from Stóra-Borg. And a Reverend. Blöndal has organised it.’

‘And what is so important at Hvammur that Blöndal requires you there the very night he ushers a criminal into our home?’

‘Margrét ...’

‘No, I insist. This is unfair.’

‘We are to discuss who shall be executioner.’

‘Executioner!’

‘All the District Officers will be present, including those from Vatnsnes who will travel with the Stóra-Borg riders. We will sleep there that night and return the next day.’

‘And in the meantime I am left alone with the woman who killed Natan Ketilsson.’

Jón looked at his wife calmly. ‘You will have your daughters.’

Margrét began to say something further, but then thought better of it. She gave her husband a hard look, took up her knitting and began working the needles furiously.

Steina watched her mother and father from under lowered brows, and picked up her dinner, feeling sick to her stomach. She held the wooden bowl in her hands and examined the gobbets of mutton swimming in the greasy broth. Slowly taking her spoon, she lifted a piece to her lips and began to chew, her tongue locating a lump of gristle within the flesh. She fought the instinct to spit it out and ground it under her teeth, swallowing in silence.



AFTER THEY DECIDE I MUST leave, the Stóra-Borg men sometimes tie my legs together in the evening, as they do with the forelegs of horses, to ensure I will not run away. It seems that with each passing day I become more like an animal to them, another dull-eyed beast to feed with what can be scraped together and to be kept out of the weather. They leave me in the dark, deny me light and air, and when I must be moved, they bind and lead me where they will.

They never speak to me here. In winter, in the badstofa, I could always hear myself breathing, and I'd get scared to swallow for fear the whole room might hear it. The only sounds to keep a body company then were the rustling of Bible pages and whisperings. I'd catch my name on the lips of others, and I knew it wasn't in blessing. Now, when they are forced by law to read out the words of a letter or proclamation, they talk as if addressing someone behind my shoulder. They refuse to meet my eyes.

You, Agnes Magnúsdóttir, have been found guilty of accessory to murder. You, Agnes Magnúsdóttir have been found guilty of arson, and conspiracy to murder. You, Agnes Magnúsdóttir, have been sentenced to death. You, Agnes. *Agnes*.

They don't know me.

I remain quiet. I am determined to close myself to the world, to tighten my heart and hold on to what has not yet been stolen from me. I cannot let myself slip away. I will hold what I am inside, and keep my hands tight around all the things I have seen and heard, and felt. The poems composed as I washed and scythed and cooked until my hands were raw. The sagas I know by heart. I am sinking all I have left and going underwater. If I speak, it will be in bubbles of air. They will not be able to keep my words for themselves. They will see the whore, the madwoman, the murderess, the female dripping blood into the grass and laughing with her mouth choked with dirt. They will say 'Agnes' and see the spider, the witch caught in the webbing of her own fateful

weaving. They might see the lamb circled by ravens, bleating for a lost mother. But they will not see me. I will not be there.



REVEREND THORVÁRDUR JÓNSSON SIGHED AS he left the church and entered the cool, damp air of the afternoon. Just over one month had passed since he had accepted Blöndal's offer to visit the condemned woman, and he had questioned his decision every day since. Each morning he had felt troubled, as though newly woken from a nightmare. Even as he had made his daily walk to the small church of Breidabólstadir to pray and sit awhile in the silence, his stomach had crowded with nerves, and his body had trembled as if exhausted by his mind's ambivalence. It had been no different today. As he had sat on the hard pew, gazing into his hands, he caught himself wishing that he were ill, gravely ill, so that he might be excused for not riding to Kornsa. His reluctance, and his willingness to sacrifice his own blessed health, horrified him.

It is too late now, he thought to himself as he walked through the rather pitiful garden within the churchyard. You have given your word to man and God, and there is no turning back.

Once, before his mother had died, the church plot had been full of small plants that threw purple blossoms over the edges of the graves in summer. His mother had said that the dead made the flowers sway, to greet the churchgoers after winter. But when she died, his father ripped out the wild flowers and the graves had lain bare ever since.

The door to the Breidabólstadircroft was ajar. As Tóti let himself in, the heavy warmth from the kitchen, and the smell of melting tallow from the candle in the corridor, made him feel nauseous.

His father was bent over the bubbling kettle, poking something with a knife.

'I ought to leave now, I think,' Tóti announced.

His father looked up from the boiling fish and nodded.

'I'm expected to arrive early in the evening to acquaint myself with the family at Kornsó, and be present when ... Well, when the criminal arrives.'

His father frowned. 'Go then, son.'

Tóti hesitated. 'Do you think I'm ready?'

Reverend Jón sighed and lifted the kettle off its hook over the coals. 'You know your own heart.'

'I've been praying in the church. I wonder what Mamma would have thought about it all.'

Tóti's father blinked slowly and looked away.

'What do *you* think, father?'

'A man must be true to his word.'

'Is it the right decision, though? I ... I don't want to displease you.'

'You should seek to please the Lord,' Reverend Jón muttered, trying to scoop his fish from the hot water with his knife.

'Will you pray for me, father?'

Tóti waited for a response, but none came. Perhaps he thinks *he* is better suited to meet murderesses, Tóti thought. Perhaps he is jealous she chose me. He watched his father lick a fragment of fish from where it had stuck to the blade. She chose *me*, he repeated to himself.

'Don't wake me when you return,' Reverend Jón called out as his son turned and left the room.

Tóti slipped a saddle over his horse and mounted. 'This is it, then,' he whispered quietly. He gently squeezed his knees to urge his horse forward, and looked back at the croft. Its thin wreath of kitchen smoke dissipated into the soft drizzle of the afternoon.

Travelling through the long grasses of the valley surrounding

the church, the Assistant Reverend tried to think of what he should say. Should he be kind and welcoming, or stern and impenetrable, like Blöndal? As he rode, he rehearsed various tones of voice, different greetings. Perhaps he should wait until he saw the woman. Unexpectedly, a small thrill flickered through his body. She was only a workmaid, but she was a *murderess*. She had killed two men. Slaughtered them like animals. He silently mouthed the word to himself. Murderess. *Morðingi*. It slipped through his mouth like milk.

As he travelled over the north peninsula with its thin lip of ocean on the horizon, the clouds began to clear and the soft red light of the late June sun flooded the pass. Drops of water glittered brightly upon the ground, and the hills appeared pink and muted, shadows moving slowly across them as clouds drifted overhead. Small insects wound their way through the air, lit up like flecks of dust as they passed through the sunshine, and the sweet, damp smell of grass, almost ready to be harvested, lingered in the cool air of the valleys. The dread that Tóti had felt so firmly lining his stomach dissipated as he fell into a quiet appreciation of the countryside before him.

We are all God's children, he thought to himself. This woman is my sister in Jesus, and I, as her spiritual brother, must guide her home. He smiled and brought his horse to a *tölt*. 'I will save her,' he whispered.