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Opening Extract from...

Thin Ice

Written by Quentin Bates

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THIN ICE

An Icelandic mystery featuring Officer Gunnhildur

Quentin Bates

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Thursday

The hard guy in the leather jacket was big, with bulky shoulders and knotted forearms, and his jaw jutted forward as if asking to be punched.

So Magni obliged, swatting the tough guy aside with an effortless backhander. He never could resist an invitation; the big man stumbled back, emitting a high-pitched keening sound as he hit the wall, his dinnerplate hands held to his face as blood seeped through his fingers.

Magni felt no animosity towards the meathead who had been stupid enough to be in the wrong place at the right time. Or was that the wrong time, he wondered? Whatever, the guy was spitting teeth into his cupped hands and whimpering, so he only needed a casual eye to be kept on him. Nothing to worry about, Magni decided with satisfaction. At any rate, the ugly black pistol in Össur's nervous hand was far more persuasive than mere muscles.

The old man's face went pale, paler than it normally was, and Alli the Cornershop didn't look like a man who spent much time in the sun. He looked sick as he handed over a carrier bag that Össur glanced into before tucking it under one arm.

'You must know you don't have a chance in hell of getting away with this,' Alli snarled. 'I'll have the pair of you bastards brought back here trussed up in barbed wire.'

'Good luck, grandpa.'

Even from behind the black balaclava, Össur's nasal voice was enough to identify him. He was sweating, though he had promised

himself that he would stay calm. At last he had the cash in his hands. Maybe it wasn't enough to retire on, but it would keep him in comfort for a good few years somewhere warm and cheap, especially if he could lose the thick-headed halfwit looking sorrowfully at the big guy who was now counting his remaining teeth.

'Come on. We're out of here,' Össur snapped and Magni emerged from his reverie, pushing open the door. 'Sit yourself down, grandpa, and don't even think of trying to come after us. All right?' The pistol in his outstretched hand pointed at Alli's face.

With an apologetic glance at the big man, now spluttering through the blood in his mouth, Magni followed Össur out and down the stairs, emerging into the quiet residential street of well-tended gardens in front of houses built fifty years ago. Nobody was moving and nothing was happening on this quiet afternoon with a chill in the still air. A dog barked in the distance and children could be heard playing in a garden somewhere in the tangle of old houses that made up this dog-leg street leading downhill to the town centre.

'Where the fuck is Árni?' Össur pulled the balaclava off his face and thrust the pistol into the pocket of his jacket, casting about for a glimpse of the souped-up Land Cruiser that should have been waiting for them, its engine idling and Árni behind the wheel, ready to roll to the end of the street, then a burst of power up the hill and they'd be on the main road and out of sight of a livid Alli the Cornershop and whatever goons he could summon at short notice.

'He's not here, is he?' Magni said, stating the obvious to Össur's irritation.

'I can fucking see that. So where is he?'

'I don't know. Call him,' Magni shrugged. 'But I reckon we'd be best off out of here pretty quick,' he said, setting off downhill at a smart pace and without a backward glance at the house they had just left.

Össur had to admit that for once Magni had a point and set off after him, one hand on the 9mm pistol in his pocket and the other hugging the shopping bag full of euros, with the smaller bag of Alli the Cornershop's finest merchandize stuffed inside his jacket.

★ ★ ★

They burst through the shopping centre's doors to find comforting but slightly distorted Christmas muzak burbling inside, even though it wasn't yet December. It was only two minutes from the quiet street where Alli the Cornershop lived in his flat above a boarded-up shop that had been closed for years, but it seemed to be a different world to this one of families browsing through shops and teenagers cruising aimlessly between the hot-dog stand and a shop selling computer games.

'Where the fuck is Árni?' Össur snarled as he sat himself down in a corner of the coffee shop, glancing out of the windows as if expecting the police or worse to arrive at any moment. He stabbed at his phone and listened in frustration as the ring tone echoed from the loudspeaker until a warm voice politely informed him that the user must be out of range and invited him to try again later.

Össur tried again immediately and the result was the same.

'Shit, shit, shit!' Össur swore, dropping the phone on the table. 'Fucking hell!' he added in a savage afterthought.

'Hey, you mind your language,' Magni reminded him gently. 'There are children about.'

'Don't you tell me what to do,' Össur snapped back, furious that the seriousness of the situation was not making an impression on Magni, who sat with his beefy hands in his lap.

'You want a coffee?'

'Of course I don't want a fucking coffee.'

'You sure?' Magni asked. 'I think it looks a little suspicious, two guys sat in a coffee shop with no coffee.'

Össur had to admit that the big man, who normally seemed slow on the uptake, was quite right.

'Go on, then.'

Össur tried his phone once more while Magni queued patiently, calling Árni's number again before trying another.

'Hey, man,' he said, trying to sound as relaxed as he could when the phone was finally answered by a sleepy voice. 'You seen Árni Sigurvins today?'

'Who?' The voice queried.

'Árni Sig. Drives a Land Cruiser. You know.'

'No, pal. Sorry.'

The same conversation was repeated twice with minor variations until Magni returned with two coffees and a sticky Danish pastry.

'You want half?' he asked, making to break it in two.

'Fuck, no.'

Össur's fingers drummed frantically on the table.

'Don't swear. I told you already.'

'Yeah, yeah. Look, we need to get out of here, and quick.'

'How about we get a taxi?'

'Are you insane?' Össur stared at him. 'A taxi? Fuck, no. Alli's going to be searching for us high and low soon. That's if he hasn't put a price on our heads already.'

Magni stuffed half of the pastry into his mouth and chewed, grinning amiably at Össur. 'Like he's going to be searching for us in a shopping centre, right? No sign of Árni?'

'Come on.'

'Already? Why don't we wait until dark?'

Össur's teeth chattered in agitation. 'Because we have to get away from here before someone notices us.'

'And that old guy finds us?'

'That's it. We need a car.'

Magni shrugged. 'Árni?'

'That useless bastard,' Össur snarled. 'When I see him, I'll twist his fucking head off. We need a car,' he repeated, looking desperately across the car park outside where people were coming and going with bags of shopping, some of them laughing as if they didn't have a care in the world. Össur wanted to kick and punch them.

'Come on.'

He pushed his chair back so hard that it banged against another table and people looked up to see what the commotion was.

'Calm down, man,' Magni urged him, but Össur was already heading for the door, practically at a run, while Magni loped after him.

Outside he cast about urgently and Magni wondered what he might be looking for.

'Hey, slow down, will you?'

'Come on,' Össur said decisively, and hurried across the car park towards the more sparsely filled area furthest from the shops. It was almost dark and the street lights flickered into life, casting their orange glow.

A large white car stood with doors open as Össur scurried towards it with Magni trailing behind. Magni saw the driver's door close and the headlights come on as the car rolled slowly across the car park. He wondered what Össur was doing as he saw him break into a run, heading to intercept the car, and then catch hold of the rear passenger door handle, yank the door open and yell something at the occupants.

By the time Magni caught up, Össur was in the car, hunched on the back seat, the door still open behind him.

'Just who are you and what do you want? Get out or I'll call the police.'

The woman in the driver's seat had the sort of determined voice that carried, but her jaw dropped and she sat in shocked silence as Össur pulled the pistol from his pocket and jammed it low and hard into the ribs of the young woman in the passenger seat. The girl started and stared, her mouth hanging open.

'You're going to shut the fuck up and drive. Understand?' Össur said, his voice hoarse. He shuffled across the broad back seat and snapped at Magni. 'Get in, will you? This lady's going to give us a lift. Now go.'

'Where are you going?'

'Be quiet, will you?' Össur pushed the muzzle of the pistol hard into the girl's ribs, making her cry out.

'Mum, please,' she pleaded.

'But where?' the woman asked. 'Which way?'

'She means which turn-off,' Magni explained patiently. 'Calm down, will you?'

'OK, the main road,' Össur decided, gnawing at the fingernails of the hand that didn't hold the gun pressed into the girl's side.

'Where are we going, Össi?' Magni asked in an undertone. 'I mean . . .'

'We'll just get away from town and have them drop us somewhere. Or we can take the car and leave them, maybe?'

'The police will be looking for it the moment these two are on their own,' Magni pointed out.

'Hey, you,' Össur said, jabbing the girl with the pistol. 'Give me your phone.'

'I forgot it. Left it at home,' she replied, her voice both surly and frightened as she edged across the seat as far as she could from the gun.

'Hers, then,' Össur ordered. 'And don't try and tell me you both came out without a phone.'

'Where is it, Mum?'

'In my bag. On the seat.'

'This one?' Össur demanded, lifting up a bag made of soft leather. The girl nodded and Össur stuffed the pistol back in his pocket as he went through the bag, throwing the contents on the seat. Lipstick, a makeup compact, a pack of tampons and a bunch of keys were all shaken out in a pile on the plush white seat before Össur triumphantly put a smartphone into his pocket. 'And your phone?' he snapped at the girl. 'Where is it?'

'Really. I didn't bring it. It's on the table at home. The battery was flat so I left it there to recharge.'

'If I find out you're lying . . .' Össur said, eyes narrow.

The woman in the driving seat looked around. 'Listen—'

'You watch the road.'

'Look, where do you want to go? Take the car if you want, as long as you don't hurt us. We won't say anything to the police. We'll just say the car was stolen, honestly.'

The fear in the woman's voice was clear. Magni could see that her hands were sweating on the wheel and he wondered what Össur had planned, if he had anything planned now that their flight would certainly have left without them. He could see that Össur was terrified that his plans had fallen through and Árni had failed to be there just at the critical moment they needed him.

'Go that way,' Össur said suddenly.

'Where?' The woman asked, baffled.

'That way over there, you stupid bitch, take the turn-off there,' Össur yelled and the woman quailed as she hauled the car off the main road and up the slip road.

'Now what?' she screeched as a roundabout approached.

'Over there, that way, go on.' Now it was fully dark and they could only see the woman's features in the glow of the dashboard. 'Faster,' Össur ordered.

'Össi, where the fuck are we going?' Magni demanded, and the brooding lack of a reply convinced him that Össur had no idea.

'Look,' Össur said in an urgent whisper, 'we'll find some place up in the country where there's no phone or anything, dump these two there and we can take the car. By the time they're found, we'll be clear away. All right?'

Magni nodded in dubious agreement.

'All right,' he said, wondering where they would find somewhere safe to dump two city women in the middle of a winter's night.

'What the hell is this place? Magni?'

Össur's voice trembled. A large white building loomed out of the darkness in front of them. Every window was black and a padlock hung from the front door.

'It used to be a community centre years ago,' Magni said. 'Then it was a hotel for a while. Don't know what it is now, though.'

'Shit. We can't stop here. We need somewhere nobody's going to see us.'

The two women still sat in the front seats of the car, hugged by the deep upholstery, and staring at the building lit up in the glare of the headlights. They sat in silence until the engine stopped and the silence deepened.

'What happened?'

'I think we ran out of petrol,' the older woman said, her hands still gripping the wheel. 'I tried to tell you, but you wouldn't listen.'

'Shut the fuck up, will you?' Össur snapped.

'Well, we'll have to stay here now, won't we?' Magni said with a laugh that set Össur's teeth on edge with frustration.

Magni made short work of the padlock and the door swung open. Össur scowled and went in last, shepherding the two women ahead of him. He flicked a light switch and swore when nothing happened.

'Hold on,' Magni said, looking around him in the faint beam of light that the torch in his phone emitted. 'There must be a fuse board here somewhere. There's power because there are lights over there.'

His voice echoed and the vapour of his breath gathered in the beam of light. Then there was darkness as he vanished around a corner and into another room, his footsteps slapping on the tiled floor.

'In here,' he called, and the two women looked at each other.

'Go on,' Össur ordered. 'You. Give me the car keys.'

'I told you, it's out of petrol,' the older woman said in rising panic, her arms wrapped around herself. 'Why are you doing this? What's wrong with you people? Why have you brought us to this place?'

'Keys,' Össur said, standing close to her and glaring into her eyes until she looked away and dropped them into his outstretched hand.

They stood in the kitchen doorway to see Magni standing on a stool looking at a fuse box high on the wall. He clicked one of the switches and looked over his shoulder.

'Try the light.'

The girl switched on the light and the long kitchen with its steel tables was flooded with fluorescent brightness as the tubes in the ceiling flickered into life. Magni jumped down from the stool.

'The lighting circuit must have been switched off,' he said, looking around the kitchen with a grin on his face, 'but the power wasn't off.' He opened a chest freezer in the corner and his grin widened as he lifted up a frozen leg of lamb. 'Roast lamb for breakfast?'

Magni turned up the heating that had been set just high enough to ensure that nothing froze and the place gradually began to warm up enough for him to discard his coat, while the two women remained huddled in theirs as they perched on kitchen chairs. Össur sat with

his hands deep in his coat pockets, angry at the usually thick-headed Magni's practical nature.

'Hey, you,' Magni called over to the older of the two women. 'Come here and stir this, will you?'

A saucepan of soup was starting to simmer on the vast stove, filling the kitchen with its aroma.

'Me?' the older woman asked.

'No, Father Christmas. Who do you think I mean?'

She took the wooden spoon uncertainly while the girl smiled to herself.

'You,' Magni said, pointing at her and the smirk disappeared. 'Have a look in those cupboards and see if you can find some bowls or something.'

Magni ladled soup into four bowls and handed them round. Össur spooned his up quickly, the two women exchanging glances and wrinkled their noses as he slurped. Magni drank his soup straight from the bowl in long draughts, and belched.

'Fuck me, that's better,' he said. 'I'd forgotten how hungry I was. Who's washing up?' He looked at everyone in turn. 'Well, I'm not doing it.'

'Nor am I. Wash up, for fuck's sake?' Össur dropped his empty bowl with a bang on the table.

'Looks like one of you ladies, I reckon.' Magni scratched his head and yawned. 'We ought to get to know each other considering we might be here a while. What's your name?'

The older woman pointed her nose in the air.

'I'm Tinna Lind,' the younger one said, a spark of amusement in her dark eyes. 'This is my mum and her name's Erna.'

'You didn't have to tell them, did you?' Erna snapped. 'How long is this ridiculous charade going to go on?'

'I'm Magni and that's Össur over there,' Magni said slowly, picking his teeth with the nail of his little finger while Össur scowled at the mention of his own name. 'And we don't want to be here any more than you do. I wonder if there's any coffee here?'

After the long drive in the dark, it was a release to sit back and relax. Össur brooded to himself, while Magni took the opportunity to

examine the two women they had managed to abduct. The older one was stylish, blonde hair smartly and simply cut, her soft leather jacket zipped to the neck, designer jeans and boots made from what looked to be the same expensive leather as her jacket. The daughter was very different, a slight young woman with an impish button nose and an air of suppressed energy about her, wearing jeans that looked more bargain basement than designer and with hair in braided cornrows, tied in a loose knot at the back of her head.

Tinna Lind looked back at him with a curiosity that contrasted with Erna's frosty aloofness. She saw a raw-boned young man with red stubble and shoulders as wide as a wardrobe sitting opposite her, with no apparent concern on his face, while the sinister of the two, the older man with the air of desperation about him, had disappeared down the hall.

Össur came back to the table and sat down, his hands still deep in his jacket pockets. He glared at the two women and finally took his hands out of his pockets, holding a packet of cigarettes in one hand. He clicked his Zippo and blew a cloud of grey smoke.

'So what do we do now, Magni?'

Magni rattled the contents of a cupboard and came up with a vacuum pack of coffee. 'I don't rightly know. This was supposed to be an easy job for me. Stand there, look a bit heavy and cash on the nail afterwards. Now I'm stuck out here in the arsehole of beyond.'

'What have you guys done?' Tinna Lind asked, looking from one to the other. 'I won't tell anyone.'

'Mind your own business if you know what's good for you,' Össur snarled.

'I want to go home right now,' Erna broke in, her voice shrill and angry. 'I demand to go home immediately.' She pushed her chair back so that it clattered on the floor behind her. Össur stood up slowly, the smoke from the cigarette curling past his eyes and into his hair.

'Shut your mouth,' he said with quiet menace.

'No. I won't be quiet. I refuse to be quiet. I've been abducted and I'll see you spend years in prison for this, you . . .'

Her words were cut short as Össur's short, sharp punch slammed

into her belly and Erna fell to the floor, doubled up and gasping for breath. Tinna Lind knelt by her mother and cradled her as Össur stepped back, the cigarette still between his lips.

'Hey, man, what d'you do that for? No call for that, was there?' Magni said, standing up and towering over Össur. 'The lady's upset but even you can see she might have a reason to be pissed off, so there's no need to smack her.' He folded his arms, the muscles of his forearms bunching and straining the sleeves of his hooded sweater.

'Don't you give me that. I don't need lessons from the fucking hired help,' Össur spat and stalked out into the lobby of the echoing hotel, clicking off lights as he went.

The man with the deeply unfashionable mullet was face down on the floor. He craned his neck, twisting around to try and see what was happening behind him, until a sharp cuff to the back of the head discouraged him. His hands were secured behind his back and one foot had been tied to the leg of the table with many bindings of thin blue rope.

He could hear the old man wheeze as he pulled up a chair and sat next to him, leaning down close enough that he could feel as well as smell the brandy fumes on his breath.

'Árni, I'm disappointed in you. I never thought you'd let me down like that.'

Árni wriggled on the floor and tried to reply, but the rag tied around his face and filling his mouth simply turned his protests into an unintelligible mumble.

Alli leaned down and picked up something from the table. He tapped it on the floor and Árni's eyes widened in disbelief. 'Now listen to me, Árni,' he said, and there was a furious desperation in his voice. 'You're going to tell me where Össi and that other idiot went, aren't you? Because Baldvin's not a happy boy these days, had his beauty spoilt. So if you don't sing like a bird, then I'm going to give these to Baldvin to play with.'

He snapped shut the pair of garden clippers, and two short, curved blades meshed neatly together as the long handles closed.

'Understand?'

Árni nodded furiously.

Alli nodded to Baldvin, lips swollen from the casual backhand swipe he had received. The big man pressed a button and the CD player burst into life.

'Ah,' Alli said with approval. 'Good old Black Sabbath, you've gotta love 'em.' His voice hardened suddenly. 'Where's Össi?' he demanded, yelling over the music, leaning forward and loosening the rag tied around Árni's face.

'I don't know where they went. They asked me to meet them here and that's all I know.'

'Bullshit!' Alli screamed and slapped Árni's face. 'You were part of it. Where did they go?'

'Honest, Alli. I don't know. Össi just said meet him here at three to give him a lift somewhere and that's all there was to it. I thought it was a job.'

'It was a fucking job,' Alli yelled, his face going red.

'No! I meant I thought it was a job for you.'

Alli nodded to Baldvin, who sat on the floor to untie the lace of Árni's scuffed training shoe and pull it off. He wrinkled his nose at the smell and glanced at Alli.

'Get the fuck on with it.'

Baldvin pulled off the sock and threw it behind him.

'Last chance,' Alli said, his eyes bulging in fury.

'I'm telling the truth!' Árni screeched. 'Össi said he needed a lift and to be here at three! I won't be late again!'

Alli handed the clippers to Baldvin. Árni could feel the cold metal hook around his little toe. Even now he could not believe that Alli could be so brutal as to carry out his threat.

'Where. Did. They. Go?' Alli said, pausing between each word. 'What was the plan, Árni?'

'I told you, I don't know any plan.'

'Shit, you're too stupid to live,' Alli said, and pointed at the foot tied to the table as Árni twisted round to see the two handles come smartly together. There was no pain at first but his eyes bulged as he saw his little toe roll across the carpet while Baldvin stood up and

hurried from the room with his hand to his mouth. It took a few seconds before the full realization hit him, followed by the pain. Alli stood up and went to the CD player, turning up the volume to drown out Árni's disbelieving sobs.

The place seemed warmer. Magni boiled water in a pot on the stove and used it to make coffee, which he gulped with obvious pleasure.

'No milk, I'm afraid,' he said to Erna, who sat pale and drawn opposite him, a cup in front of her.

'What's going to happen to us?'

'What? Oh, you'll be all right. I expect we'll drop you off somewhere tomorrow.'

'Where?' Her eyes widened in confusion. 'Why? Who are you two?

'Eh? I shouldn't tell you. You know, you'll tell the police and everything.'

Erna's face softened as she looked him in the eyes, arms wrapped around herself. 'Help us get away. I won't say anything to the police,' she whispered. 'But don't hurt us, will you?'

'What?' Magni looked surprised at the suggestion. 'Why should I want to hurt you?'

'Your friend?'

'Össi?' He laughed. 'He won't hurt you.'

'He already did. Didn't you see?'

A tear crept down Erna's cheek.

'He gave you a bit of a tap, but you were screaming at him,' Magni said. 'And Össur's a nervous type. Know what I mean?'

'This place is called Hotel Hraun,' Tinna Lind announced, marching into the kitchen and dropping some brochures on the table. 'See? Hotel Hraun offers peace and seclusion in its selection of twelve luxury rooms, all with full en suite facilities. Guests have the opportunity of sampling some of the finest Icelandic cuisine in our exclusive restaurant,' she read out. 'That's the big room out there, I guess. Anyway, the place is open seven months a year, but closes from No-

vember to April. So nobody's going to come here until April. That's cheerful, isn't it?'

'We won't be here long, just you see,' Magni said.

'We have a car and no petrol and we're stuck in an empty hotel miles from anywhere. Oh, and I already checked, the phone's not working. So how do you propose getting back to civilization, or even have any ideas on what we eat once the freezer's empty?'

'I . . . er. That's for Össur to decide. He's the man,' Magni said as Össur appeared in the doorway. 'I'm just the hired help.'

Erna looked up, lifting her eyes from the floor.

'Where do we sleep?' she asked, eyes darting around the room.

'Up to you, I guess,' Magni said. 'There's plenty of rooms to choose from.'

The house was the cheapest place Gísli and Drífa had been able to find, a ramshackle building dating back to a time before building regulations had been anything more than a loose set of guidelines. In the intervening years a string of owners had put their stamp on the place one by one, adding an extension here and a bathroom there, as well as a couple of sheds outside.

There was a front door that was rarely used, while the parking spaces at the back of the house meant the back door was the entrance that everyone used. Gísli and Drífa were living in the kitchen and the room at the rear of the back-to-front building, while the living room had become a workshop while the new floor was being laid on old joists. For Gunna it was a relief to escape the city and spend a couple of hours with young Kjartan Gíslason on her lap while Gísli, Laufey and Steini hammered and sawed in the next room.

'You look tired, Drífa,' Gunna said when there was a lull in the hammering.

'Yeah, a bit.'

'Keeping you awake, is he?'

'Twice last night,' Drífa yawned. 'Which is a good night.'

'The house looks good. Or it will do once the living room's done.'

'I hope so. I don't know how Gísli would have managed without

Steini to give him a hand. He's such a lovely man. Where did you find him, Gunna?'

'Floating in the harbour at Sandgerdi a few years ago.'

Drífa looked sideways at Gunna, unsure if this were a joke of some kind. 'But you knew him before, didn't you?'

The question gave Gunna an awkward stab of recollection. 'Sort of. I knew who he was and that he had been at sea with Laufey's father. Steini was on board when Raggi was lost and took part in the search. I know he was at the memorial service, but to be quite honest, I was such a wreck that day that it all passed in a daze.'

She shivered at the recollection of those weeks, first the call from the command centre to tell her that Ragnar was not accounted for, a phrase that she found ridiculous at the time, the visit from the ship's commanding officer, ill at ease and formal in his dress uniform, and the difficult calls and visits from others he had sailed with. The part that she found hardest to accept was that there had been no body, no remains, nothing to pack in a box and bury where she and the children could visit it. There had been a formal inquiry that placed no particular blame anywhere and culminated in an open verdict. There had been no discernible reason why Ragnar should have vanished under the hull of the disabled coaster the Coast Guard vessel had towed clear of the bay where it had grounded, and his dive partner at the time had not been able to account for his disappearance.

The memorial service had been packed and Gunna had sat through it numb as uniformed figures filled the church behind her. What had stayed in her mind as the defining image of that grim day was ten-year-old Gísli in his best clothes with a look of confusion on his face, wondering where his stepfather had disappeared to while baby Laufey laughed and chattered to herself.

'Gunna?'

It seemed suddenly unreal that the young boy and the girl who had been a baby in her arms on that long, cold day were now busily nailing down floorboards in the next room.

'Gunna?'

She shook her head and hugged Kjartan as he gurgled on her lap.

'Sorry, Drífa. I was miles away.'

'You want me to take him?'

'No, he's fine here. I'm sure you don't mind a break, do you?'

'Not at all.' Drífa laughed, and looked at the kitchen clock. 'Do you want to eat here, or are you and Steini and Laufey going home?'

'I'm happy to eat here. Shall we get a takeaway?'

Drífa fetched a menu pinned to the corkboard and they quickly selected.

'Half an hour,' Drífa said, putting the phone down. 'Will you go, or shall I?'

'I'll go,' Gunna decided. 'After all, it's granny's treat. The place just down from the church, is it?'

'That's the one. It'll be great not to have to cook for a change.'

Gunna poured herself half a mug of coffee and sipped. Kjartan sat with his hands on the table in front of her, playing with a spoon that tinkled every time he dropped it on the table top.

'Gunna, I'm a bit concerned about Gísli,' Drífa said quietly, peering through the open door at the three of them laughing and working in the other room.

'What's the matter?' Gunna asked, her antennae immediately alert.

'It's his father,' Drífa said haltingly and Gunna felt a chill for a second time. 'I don't know if I should tell you, really.'

'Why? What's the problem?'

'I'm not sure. You know they were in touch for a while when Gísli went and found him? It was when he was having a really bad time, you know . . . ?'

'Yeah, I know,' Gunna said. Gísli fathering two children six weeks apart had hit her hard, but she could not avoid seeing that guilt had eaten him up during those awkward months after Soffía had given birth to Ari Gíslason and Drífa had produced Kjartan Gíslason only a few weeks later.

'Well, you know his dad didn't want to know? Wasn't interested?'

'Yeah, and I wasn't exactly surprised.'

'He's been in touch again. A couple of weeks ago his dad called and then came out here to see him. He's not well and I think Gísli's

a bit screwed up about it. But you know what he's like. If he has a problem, he keeps it bottled up inside.'

'Tell me about it,' Gunna said with a shudder at being reminded within the space of a few minutes of both the man in her life she would rather forget about and the one whose loss was still deeply painful. 'I'll have a quiet word if you like.'