

THE JOURNEY HOME

by

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Prologue

They jostled against one another, reared in challenge, slapped and grasped, jerked and grappled. They were so angry, pushing, shoving and thrusting, mutely protesting ‘my space! Mine!’ Rain beat down and a cold chill gusted, whistling their irritation and throwing the residue of their disagreements to the drenched fields below and beyond.

Always uneasy in such weather, she watched the warring trees warily. Storm-tossed debris littered the ground, and the rumble of thunder and rare cracks of lightning supported her fancy of nature at war with itself. She couldn’t help wanting to burrow into a safe hole far away until calm prevailed once more.

Meantime, it was impossible to sleep. The wind whistled loudly, shrilly, and tried its best to worm its way inside through unexpected cracks, to wreak havoc within as it did without. Rain sluiced down the windows, blurring and obscuring her view. But her nerves were drawn taut and she was unable to leave her watch post while nature’s power was demonstrated so powerfully.

Hours passed. Just when she thought, hoped, prayed it was at an end, the wind would shrill louder, shake the window frames, walls and roof unmercifully until she feared they would give way and leave her exposed to the cruel forces that raged.

Again, as she had innumerable times before, she wondered how she, who was actively wary of

nature's less benign manifestations, had come to live in a country where nature's excesses were the norm, demonstrated, felt and endured on a daily basis.

This island was routinely battered by gale force winds, accompanied by wind-whipped rains, sleet and hail. Earthquakes rocked and split the ground daily, as well as buildings and roads. Several volcanoes dotted the island and took turns erupting, spewing rivers of black lava across the already cracked and blackened terrain, flowing until they bumped up against the edges of glacial ice where they finally halted, spent.

This country was in constant motion, upheaval and violent growth, situated on a vast underwater line of volcanoes. Winter dominated two thirds of the year; the summer months rarely saw temperatures in excess of what would be termed Spring anywhere else.

It was hard, in the face of the current storm, to comprehend the reason she had come here and, despite all the extremities and her own timidity, stayed. At times like this, she thought she must have been out of her mind. But it didn't explain why, once she had come to her senses, she still remained.

There was something about this island. It might frighten her at times, intimidate her on a regular basis, but its magnificence, its rawness, the vastness of its vistas, and the peace and tranquility that permeated her soul when it was calm, soothed and filled her soul. She could breathe here, think, just

'be' while she communed with the land. And it was so beautiful.

It took scant minutes to escape the ever growing crowds, or any hint of humanity. And that was a possibility sorely lacking in all the places she had ever been before. It was enough to hold her here even through the worst storms.

Her past life had required her to endure storms of a very different sort, the kind that could reverberate in one's soul decades after they had passed. Here, on this island, she could heal. She had felt the healing balm in the past. She knew it was there. She stayed to let it infuse her again. It made no difference how long it took. It was the only thing that kept her sane, that made her feel safe. She had friends, and a life here, one in which the only storms she had to confront were of nature's making. And that was a battle she would willingly endure.

CHAPTER 1

Twenty five years previously:

Glancing nervously at the darkening sky, Jan's grasp on the wheel tightened until her knuckles whitened with the pressure and tension of her grip. She was already driving as quickly as she dared. The trees lining the narrow road seemed to crowd ever closer, branches waving with abandonment, precursors of the storm that hovered but had yet to break.

The air was heavy and fairly crackled. Hues of purple, dark blue and a weird green suffused the heavens. Thick clouds raced across the sky. For a moment Jan wished she could disappear among them, drawn by a chariot pulled by the fastest pair of pegasai.

The fantasy was brought jolting back to reality by a very real thump after which the wheel almost jerked out of her hands. Only the fact that she had a death's grip kept her from losing control as the car crashed into a ditch that edged the road. And like a moat, it was filled with water that splashed wildly up and in a spray in protest at the car's intrusion.

Jan hit the brake just before she would have hit the tree that sat squarely in her path in the bend in the road. The car died but it took her a moment to realize it. The storm had finally broken, its ferocity drowning out every other sound.

Reaction hit. Jan, still grasping the wheel, began to shake. Her eyes closed as she tried to gain control. A moment later they flew open and she quickly looked into the rearview mirror. The view was skewed. Something must have knocked it out of alignment. All she could see were wildly waving tree branches. She wasted no time and moved her glance to the right side mirror. It showed a piece of the road behind her, but was angled such that again, she mostly saw the trees behind her.

With a wince of pain, she loosened her hands so that she could release the restraining seatbelt, then turned to stare out the back window. Rain slashed and obscured the little she could make out in the darkness. To her relief, flashes of lightning, luckily far away, were the only lights to break the blanket of inky blackness.

But that illusive relief was momentary. Pursuit may have been evaded for now, but she knew that she had not escaped for long. And the relentless hunter could appear behind her at any minute. Added to that certain knowledge was her current predicament. She attempted to start the engine; it gave a protesting whine and died again.

When she opened her car door, a convenient lightning flash glinted off the deep water in the ditch. She would have to exit on the other side. The car listed at a pronounced angle, the left side immersed in the deep ditch water while the right side still rested on the crown of the road.

It was difficult to climb out of the bucket seat, over the handbrake and into the passenger seat, not due solely to the awkward angle at which the car

had come to rest, but because her bags had flown about during the crash and now hampered her movements. But finally she succeeded.

Still keeping a close eye alert for traffic, she fumbled in the dark and finally found her handbag wedged under her heavier backpack. She blindly rummaged inside until she found a tiny penlight and turned it on. It seemed overly bright in the pitch black interior, but didn't actually extend far enough for her to see much beyond a few inches.

The storm raged fiercely. There was no way she could look for help in the face of it; she'd be blown away, and drenched through before she'd gone a foot. It made her nervous to realize her wreck was obscured from oncoming traffic. She'd just have to hope the tree would protect her from any further impacts.

That which made her most apprehensive was traffic coming from behind her. She only hoped that the storm's fierceness would be enough to slow and maybe discourage her pursuer from braving nature's wrath for the duration. If he did come, perhaps he would not see the partially obscured car in the gloom and rain. These were her weak hopes, for she knew what would happen if he caught her. She shivered again at the thought.

Jan opened her backpack and drew out a thick sweater. It was made of Icelandic lopi wool, a rare present and one she cherished. She drew it over her thin shirt and soon its warmth made it possible for her to relax a little.

Her thoughts turned to a happier time when her great aunt Hilda had given her the sweater.

CHAPTER 2

It had been her 17th birthday and her great aunt had just returned from one of her numerous trips abroad, this time to Iceland.

Just the name of the country was exotic, calling to mind a country covered in ice and snow. She remembered her great aunt's laugh and protests that the country had much more to offer. Then she had handed Jan a huge bundle and wished her a happy birthday.

Jan was caught totally by surprise. Birthdays were seldom acknowledged in her parents' house and gifts were few and far between. She flushed with pleasure and fumbled to open the bundle.

When she finally managed, she had drawn out the sweater which she now wore, awed by its beauty and exotic design, entranced by its softness and warmth. She'd tried it on and it was a perfect fit. She had stammered her thanks. Her great aunt had simply given her a warm hug and casually returned to her conversation with Jan's parents. Jan, left to her own devices, had pulled out an atlas and found the tiny island off the east coast of Greenland, impossibly far from her birthplace in rural Wisconsin. Why, the closest town, Horicon, lay some 15 miles distant. She had been there only once.

That had been the last time Jan had seen her great aunt, but she remembered her with fond thoughts and warm memories. She had learned that her great

aunt had died shortly after that memorable visit, deep in preparations for yet another trip.

During idle moments, she had wondered about that distant land that had produced her sweater. One day, she vowed, she would follow in her great aunt's footsteps and visit the island. Her great aunt's tantalizing protests that the island offered more than snow and ice and the remembered enthusiastic, yet distant look her great aunt's eye, were enough to spark her curiosity.

Still keeping a sharp watch for approaching headlights, Jan subsided into her ruminations. It had been a short year later when Jan had quit her parents' home. She had been back only once since then, to attend their joint funeral. She had been on her own ever since. There was no other family, no cousins, no grandparents, no one.

Jan's parents had brought her up according to their beliefs, in a house of silence. She was home-schooled. Conversation was kept to a minimum. There was no television, no radio, no daily newspapers or magazines. Books included school texts and the Bible. Little mail was received: only bills which her father paid promptly. There was a telephone but she was not allowed to call out. The number was unlisted; only utility companies and her father's employer knew it. Neighbors were neither acknowledged nor welcomed. Her parents wanted only solitude.

They were not old when Jan had been born, yet they heralded her arrival with a resigned sense of responsibility. They treated her with great reserve. She often felt she was an unwelcome intrusion in

their lives, rather than being an intrinsic part of their small family.

When she turned 18, they handed her \$500 and a piece of paper with the address of the YWCA in Chicago. They firmly informed her that it was time for her to leave and pursue her own life on her own. They didn't quite disown her but made it plain that they felt their responsibility for her upbringing had been fulfilled and that now they just wanted to be alone. And so, ill-prepared for the outside world, she had gathered her few clothes and caught the bus that took her into Chicago and a totally different life.

CHAPTER 3

Chicago was a shock to her system. The noise alone was disconcerting, almost more than she could bear. And the people! There were so many of them, everywhere! Jan felt breathless just watching the hustle and bustle of crowds moving along the sidewalks and suddenly longed for empty spaces and quiet – a private moment to collect her thoughts and reflect. She couldn't help a brief bitter thought that her parents could have better prepared her for all of this. But she knew it was no use. Her parents had never wavered in all the 18 years she had lived with them. They were as they were and no amount of wistful thinking would change them.

As a result, Jan was reserved and wary of everything and everyone. She fingered the slip of paper with the address her parents had given her. She made her way inside the bus depot and shyly waited until she could speak to the man behind the service counter. She asked for directions to the YWCA and handed him the paper. The man, seemingly well used to such questions, pulled out a map and a bus schedule, still not looking her in the face. He marked both and handed them over, then pointed to where she could catch the correct bus. Before she could thank him, he had already turned to the next customer.

Jan clutched the papers in one hand, her bag in the other and made her way to the bus stop. It was a few minutes before the bus arrived. In the meantime, she read the bus schedule and perused the map. When the bus arrived, she followed the lead of those around her and thanks to an overheard

conversation, even had the correct change ready when her turn came to board and pay.

She settled into the first available seat, which happened to be next to a middle-aged skinny black man. When the bus started to move, with a smelly expulsion of black smoke, Jan wrinkled her nose and started to anxiously watch the passing street signs, afraid she would miss her stop.

Her seat mate startled her when he told her not to worry – the exit to the ‘Y’ was some distance away. When she looked at him, amazed at his clairvoyance, he pointed at the circles on the map. She flushed a little and thanked him. He pointed at the map and told her the street exit she needed and their current location. Then he turned and focused on the passing landscape out the window.

Jan continued to watch the passing streets but not in such a tizzy. Her seat mate’s silence suited her, being what she was accustomed to. But when her stop did come and she rose to exit, he turned and gave her an encouraging smile which she hesitantly returned before climbing down the steps and looking around. The YWCA was visible, half a block down the street.

Here the crowds were somewhat less, but to her inexperienced eyes, the vehicular traffic was just as frantic. Once she had rented a bed, she settled her things and tried to take stock. She had \$455 left. She was worried at how quickly the money was depleting. She supposed the first thing to do was to find a job. This was daunting.

She consulted with the proprietor who suggested checking the want ads in the newspapers, and pointed out the community library was only two blocks away. There she could find plenty of papers at no cost.

Jan thanked her, got directions to the library and after collecting her purse, and firmly locking her cubicle, walked directly to the library. She paid a nominal fee for a year's membership. She couldn't resist when she saw the plethora of reading material. She could barely restrain herself from immersing herself in one book or another! There were so many!

But she had come here with a particular purpose in mind, so she resolutely turned to the periodicals and soon was scanning the job listings. With no special training, her choices were limited, but she found a few that looked promising. She wrote down the particulars and was about to ask about a local pay phone when she noticed a discrete sign next to the checkout desk: Help Wanted. Heart leaping with hope, she waited for the librarian to be free and then asked about the position.

The librarian, a no-nonsense woman of indeterminable age, looked her over and motioned for her to follow her into her office.

“What is your name, young lady?” asked the librarian whose name tag read ‘Nan McNeal’.

“Janet Vane, but I'm usually called Jan,” she replied.

“How old are you?”

“18.”

“Hmm. Do you have any experience?” asked Ms. McNeal.

Jan anxiously answered, “No, but I’m a very hard worker and I learn quickly.”

Ms. McNeal looked doubtful for a moment. “Well, we need someone who can start immediately, and who can work six days a week. We can’t pay much more than minimum wage. Our workers need to be reliable, on-time, and not forever calling in sick.”

Jan said, “Please. Give me a chance. I can be all those things. I’m rarely sick and (she continued wistfully) I love books. I promise to work hard. Please.”

Ms. McNeal studied Jan intently. “Well, I suppose we can give you a try. Be here promptly at 8 a.m. tomorrow morning.”

Jan smiled ecstatically. “Thank you! I’ll be here.”

Ms. McNeal asked, “What is your address?”

Jan replied, “I only arrived in town today. I am staying at the YWCA two blocks away.”

Ms. McNeal said, “You will need to fill out this tax card. What is your social security number?”

Jan looked confused. I...I don’t know.”

Ms. McNeal frowned. “Have you never had a job before?”

“No,” blushed Jan.

“Well, this is what you must do,” replied Ms. McNeal briskly, and proceeded to explain where Jan needed to go and what to do before the next day.

Jan, instructions in hand, descended the library steps and spent the rest of the afternoon following Ms. McNeal’s instructions.

It was with a sense of pride, accomplishment and hope that she presented herself at the library the next morning and handed over the filled-out forms to her new boss.

It wasn’t long before Ms. McNeal relaxed her vigilance. Jan was indeed a fast learner, careful of the books and periodicals, helpful, cheerful and always on-time. Sometimes she arrived before the door was unlocked. Soon Ms. McNeal was watching out for her young protégé, and after Jan had been working there for awhile, helped her find a tiny apartment. She even encouraged Jan to take evening classes at the community college. Jan left only once that first year: to attend her parents’ funeral following a freak gas-line break.

Over the course of the next three years, Jan became a cherished assistant at the library and earned a certificate of achievement from the two year community college. Then it was that Ms. McNeal urged Jan to seek further education at the state university. This would be a challenge, both

time-wise and financially, but Jan thought about it with longing. She had sold her parents' place so had some savings. She just didn't want to lose her job at the library nor see the last of her friend, Nan McNeal. The two women, one young, one elderly, had become firm friends over the years, a first for Jan and a seldom occurrence for Nan McNeal, too. But Nan was firm. She knew this was Jan's chance and didn't want sentiment to stand in the way.

“You can work part-time here, maybe Saturdays, but you must seek your future, Jan.”

“I know. But I will miss it here so much and you, Nan. I will miss you,” replied Jan.

“I'm not going anywhere,” said Nan. “Now send in your application,” she urged.

So Jan did. The next four years were busy ones but Jan persisted and acquired a B.A. in English. Nan was there at her graduation. She congratulated Jan with a rare hug and a small gift.

Jan, still unaccustomed to gifts, blushed with pleasure. She opened the box to find a gold chain. Suspended from the chain was a fire opal.

“I'm told the opal is from Iceland,” said Nan. “I thought the fiery sparks in the stone would pique your curiosity; they did mine.” And she smiled.

Jan loved it! She immediately donned the necklace and was rarely seen without it from that time forward. It struck her that both the amazing gifts she had been given, first the sweater and now

the necklace, came from Iceland. It seemed like an omen.

CHAPTER 4

Light filled the interior of the car. Jan, almost asleep, started awake. The rain was slightly less severe now. The windows could be patchily seen through on occasion. Nerves on edge, she crouched low but peered to see from which direction the lights originated. A huge truck was inching its way around the tree, coming from the opposite direction. Moments later it was gone, and once again coal black shadows surrounded her. The wind still raged but Jan sensed the storm would soon pass. And then she must decide what to do. For now, she could only huddle inside, escaping the rough weather in the depths of her memories.

CHAPTER 5

When Jan began again to work full time at the library, it was as Nan's second in command. Jan was then 25. She had a good job, enough money to support herself, a good friend, and her own apartment. Everything was good. She was happy.

Then disaster struck.

Nan had a heart attack. She never regained consciousness. She and Jan had become close friends, yet Nan maintained a fierce privacy about her family and Jan never sought to pry. So Jan was extremely surprised when a sister showed up to arrange the funeral. Unfortunately, the sister, a Mrs. Barrows, was not the kind but fair woman Nan had been. Rather, she was stiff, and turned up her nose at Jan's suggestions.

"Nan and I were never close. She insisted on being a *librarian* when she could have been a lady of means. Why, I'll never understand!" Mrs. Barrows sniffed in disgust and puzzlement.

She continued her diatribe. "We've no other relatives but she never chose to keep in touch. My own sister shunned me! Well! Now we'll see who has the last laugh. As her only surviving relative, naturally I inherit everything and now I'll be able to live as I've always deserved."

Jan was embarrassed to hear all this but privately understood why Nan hadn't kept in touch with her sister. She was a most unpleasant, grasping female.

“If you could just let me know about the funeral... Nan was my friend and I’d like to say my final goodbyes,” she tendered gently.

“There isn’t going to be a burial,” said Mrs. Barrows, flatly. “They cost too much. No, I’m having her cremated and her ashes scattered. No service as I’m alone. No. You’ll just have to say goodbye on your own.” Then Mrs. Barrows huffed out.

Jan was stricken. That this was the end for her dear friend! She decided right there and then to hold a memorial service at the library. Nan had worked there for over thirty years. Many people who frequented the library had known Nan McNeal and respected her. Jan was sure that many would want to pay their respects. So she wrote up an announcement and prominently displayed it on the bulletin board that graced the entryway.

Sunday night, 7 p.m. Jan had arranged chairs, candles, a basket of cookies, and tea and coffee urns in the periodical corner. Folk began to trickle in, by ones and twos, and made their way to the corner, many dressed in their best. Jan had enlarged a picture of Nan and placed it on an easel where all could see. More than one paused before the picture for a moment or two. By 7:15, there was standing room only. Some Jan recognized, others not. Nan had obviously touched a lot of lives. Most of the library staff were there, including Pam, Nick, J.C., Kevin and Candice. People, cups in hand, gathered in groups. As Jan passed between them, she heard Nan’s name mentioned over and over again.

This was Nan's memorial. She would have been touched to see so many people here. Jan smiled inside. Nan had made a difference. This turnout was balm to her heart.

Another surprise was in store. Monday morning, just as Nan opened the doors to the public, Mrs. Barrows came bursting in.

"If you think you can get away with this," she bit out without preamble, "you have another thought coming! She was *my* sister, no kin to you!" Then she stormed out the same way she'd come.

Jan was confused. She had no idea what Mrs. Barrows was talking about. She shook her head and went back to the day's work. But when she arrived at home that evening, she got some inkling of what Mrs. Barrows had been ranting about. Among the bills and regular flyers was a letter from a lawyer. Jan opened it to find an invitation to visit said lawyer – a Mr. Andrew Tate – at 10 a.m. the following Wednesday, with regard to the Nan McNeal estate.

At the appointed hour, Jan entered the lawyer's reception room to find Mrs. Barrows already there and looking daggers at her. She didn't speak however, although Jan greeted her politely. Moments later Mr. Tate exited his office to shake hands with both of them and invited them into his office where two chairs were pulled up before his desk.

"Mrs. Barrows, Ms. Vane. Please accept my condolences on the passing of Ms. McNeal. I knew her well. My office handled all her legal affairs

over the years. Ms. McNeal was a fine woman with a lot of common sense, and she was a respected member of our community. Her loss will be felt,” he said simply.

Mrs. Barrows just sniffed. But Jan said, “Thank you. Nan was strict but fair. She gave me my first job and encouraged me to seek further education. We became good friends over the last eight years and I shall miss her very much.”

Mr. Tate smiled at her words. He said, “Well, ladies, I’ve called you here because Ms. McNeal’s last will and testament concerns both of you.”

When Mrs. Barrows leaned forward to let her displeasure be known, he held up an admonitory hand and continued. “I met with Ms. McNeal on several occasions. It was to me that she came to write her last wishes. I assure you, the contents are incontestable and final.”

“Now, to paraphrase, she wrote the following.”

‘Edna, there’s no denying that we are blood sisters and as my only surviving relative, one might think you were entitled to be heir to all my worldly goods. However, we have never been close. You went your way and I went mine and I think this was agreeable to both of us. You have never understood my love for my job nor my position in my chosen community. Instead, you have disparaged it and me each and every time we have had contact.

Therefore, I do not acknowledge that you should benefit from that for which you have no respect, liking or understanding. I leave to you those things

that I inherited from our parents, for to those you have an unquestionable right. Below, I leave a fully itemized list of them.

All other of my possessions, obtained through my own efforts and tuition, I leave to my young friend, Janet Vane, who is more sister to my heart and profession than you, Edna, could ever be.

Jan, do not worry over this. It is my final wish, and totally within the bounds of my legal rights. My young friend, keep what you want, sell the rest and make good use of the proceeds. You are a good person, a worthy person, with a modicum of common sense. You brought happiness and friendship into my life when my own kin had sucked it dry, leaving me bitter and barren. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I know you'll remember me with affection and respect when I'm gone. What more could anyone ask for? I wish you a good life, full of honest work and, hopefully, true friendships. Take care.'

Sincerely,

Nancy McNeal

After he had finished reading this, Mr. Tate waited for the inevitable reaction from Mrs. Barrows. She did not disappoint him. In high color and higher dudgeon, she blasted him, Jan and her sister in equal parts for the next minutes. Mr. Tate stood it until she paused to draw breath, then coolly cut in.

“That’s quite enough, Mrs. Barrows. As I told you before, the document is legally binding. Nothing you might say or do can change it. Now, when would be a good time for you to receive those items to which you are entitled?”

Mrs. Barrows looked like she wanted nothing more than to continue venting her spleen, but with another look at Mr. Tate’s implacable mien, she merely said, “Immediately. I want to leave this accursed place as soon as possible!”

Mr. Tate said, “I thought you might feel this way. I have arranged for my clerk to take you to Ms. McNeal’s house right away. He will consult the list and mark the items off as you take possession. That way we’ll be sure you miss nothing to which you are legally entitled. I bid you good day.”

Mrs. Barrows was summarily handed over to a Mr. Banyon and Mr. Tate closed the door after her with an audible sigh of relief. He sat down again and offered Jan a friendly smile. With a slight twinkle in his eyes, he said, “That can’t have been pleasant for you, Ms. Vane. But Nan knew exactly what she was doing. She even warned me that her sister would probably make a scene and told me how to handle her. But now the worst is over and we can proceed to more agreeable prospects.”

Jan smiled shyly. “You were at the memorial service, weren’t you?”

Mr. Tate replied, “Yes. Nan was a dear friend. She would have been touched by your efforts and the turnout. Thank you for doing that.”

“Now, getting back to business, do you have any idea how great Ms. McNeal’s estate is? No? I thought not. Ms. McNeal – Nan – never gave you any intimation?”

At Jan’s negative reply, he said, “I didn’t think so. She had a tendency to keep things close to her chest, but she spoke with me quite often about you and your progress. She was truly fond of and proud of you.”

Jan blushed at his words, happy to know her friend had returned her affection and respect.

Mr. Tate continued. “Besides the house and its contents which, by the way, include several first edition volumes in excellent condition, after death taxes she has left you approximately \$250,000.”

Jan almost fainted in astonishment. Nan had lived as frugally as she herself. She couldn’t take it in. “I don’t understand. She never acted like... She never alluded to being wealthy. She was head librarian at a small community library and seemed happy to be so,” she said bewilderedly.

“Yes. She preferred the simple life. But, in fact, she was heiress to a considerable fortune from her grandmother. Her sister inherited similarly from their parents, cutting Nan out totally, so that each should have an equal start. Nan thought that was just. She had enough for her own needs and wants and simply let the rest accumulate interest over the last forty years, unlike her sister who, along with her spendthrift husband, twiddled away her own inheritance.”

“Nan and I knew each other for close on 45 years,” ruminated Mr. Tate. “I once asked her to marry me but she preferred to remain friends and we have been ever since,” he confided.

“You will miss her as much as I will,” asserted Jan.

“Yes. Nan was a wonderful person,” agreed Mr. Tate. “But she opened up and became a warmer person these last few years and I know it was due to you. Thank you, Jan, for being such a good friend to Nan,” he responded sincerely.

Jan blushed again, but said, “Nan was my first and best friend. I won’t ever forget her.”

Mr. Tate simply nodded. “Well, at your discretion, we’ll go through everything and get this settled. Just let me know.”

Jan thanked him again and took her leave. She had a lot to think about.

CHAPTER 6

She made her way automatically to the library. She was having a hard time taking it all in. In mere days, her whole life had taken a dramatic turn. She had, over the last 7 ½ years, gone from a penniless, ignorant, naive and lonely young girl to a young woman with education, a good job, and with the ability to stand on her own two feet. And more, she had been blessed with a true friend and mentor. Where, before, she'd been the one in search of help, now she stood on the other side of the metaphorical table, helping others in need. She had a lot to thank Nan for, and she did, with all her heart.

Now, in what felt to her like one fell swoop, she had lost her best friend. Consequently, a door to a life she had never imagined in her wildest dreams had been opened. She could, if she chose, turn her back on this job, travel the world – immediately Iceland popped into her head, become idle and spend lazy days lifting a finger no further than to beckon a waiter or maid. Here the ridiculousness of it all hit her and an explosive laugh bubbled to her lips. Luckily she was in her office with the door closed so no one raised scandalized eyes in her direction.

Another option was to follow in Nan's stead: devote her days and years here to this tiny library. It would not be an onerous task, she thought with a slight smile. She could move into Nan's house, continue to let the money accrue interest, using only what she needed for her small day to day needs. She'd never want for anything, and always have security. Jan could think of worse futures.

Or...perhaps she could spread her wings a little. She had never taken a day off, let alone a vacation, in all the years since she'd left her parents' home. Perhaps it was time to do so. And afterwards she could decide what to do with her life.

This last felt right. Jan could almost see Nan's approving nod and a smile momentarily fluttered around her mouth. She would look into flights to Iceland on the morrow.

When she left the library that evening, she took with her a few volumes on Iceland. None were very up-to-date, but should give some idea of what she could expect. Among the books was an autobiography: *Ripples From Iceland* by Amalia Lindal. This, felt Jan, would be a fascinating read, written by an Englishwoman who had come to Iceland as bride to a native Icelander, and described her life with insightful points on the differences in her own and her adopted culture and country.

Jan had been promoted to head librarian almost instantly upon Nan's demise. While the legalities of Nan's estate were being handled, Jan set about hiring an assistant librarian and making sure that the library continued to run smoothly during the transition in staff. She made very minor changes otherwise. Nan had run a tight ship; she could do worse than to emulate her efforts.

As head, Jan's salary rose accordingly. But Jan found it made little difference. Her life carried on in its usual manner. It was in her personal life that Nan's loss made a huge impact. Although pleasant with others, Jan had never found it easy to make friends. In fact, Nan had solely occupied that

position in Jan's life. And now that Nan was gone, Jan felt her absence keenly.

At the end of a work day, Jan had an empty apartment awaiting her, no one to share the quirks, irritations, and minor happenings of the day. It was a dismal state of affairs and Jan realized that the lure of a vacation, requiring a complete change of pace, had never loomed brighter in her mind.

She called Mr. Tate and informed him of her decision to, at least for now, keep the house and contents as is, and the money safely accruing interest, while she went off on a much-needed holiday. It would be open-ended. She had no idea how long she would be gone but she did have a destination in mind – Iceland – and she would be in touch when she knew more. Mr. Tate accepted her decisions calmly and wished her a good time.

CHAPTER 7

Looking through the rain-streaked glass, Jan noted the faintest brightening of the sky. She could almost see the shadowy outlines of the trees and bushes surrounding her car. Dawn was not far off. And with the break of dawn, she must make a decision, one she shied away from. She let the patter of the rain and the quiet solitude suck her back into the past.

CHAPTER 8

Jan discovered that there was a direct flight from Chicago to Reykjavik. This made her arrangements simple. All she had to do was choose a day. She booked a flight but, upon discovering it was possible to leave the return date open, only one way. She wasn't sure how long she wanted to be away. She had never taken a vacation before and had more than 4 months' worth accumulated. She arranged for her assistant to act as temporary head for the next two months, confident she would be up to the task. She needn't worry that the smooth routine that had been established would break down should she choose to be away two months or even longer.

Candice Lund would manage just fine. She was experienced and had seamlessly fitted into the position of assistant head and the established routine without a hitch. Somewhat older than Jan, she had a family and left promptly each day. She was polite and hard working but never talked of her home life, keeping it and her life at work strictly separated. She and Jan had an amicable working relationship, but there it ended.

The day finally arrived. Jan boarded and for the first time heard Icelandic-accented English, as well as what must be Icelandic being spoken by groups of people throughout the plane's cabin. Of course she didn't understand a single word, but it was fascinating just to listen. It piqued her imagination about what they could possibly be talking about.

She ended up sitting next to a young woman holding a few months' old infant. Jan had the coveted window seat. She wanted to see as much as possible. This was both her first flight to Iceland and her first flight ever.

When all had boarded, it developed that Jan and her seatmate had the row of three seats to themselves. So after a smooth take-off, the young mother moved to the aisle seat and used the middle seat to spread out while caring for her baby.

Jan learned that she and her child were on their way to rejoin her husband on the American base in Keflavik. She had been visiting family and was now returning. Learning that Jan was going to the island for the first time, Diane, for that was her name, proceeded to give Jan a few pointers about what to expect and good sites to visit.

Jan soaked it all in. She had brought a copy of *Ripples From Iceland* with her and recognized some of the place names that Diane rattled off.

“Icelanders may seem a bit stern or cold. But it’s not true,” assured Diane. “They’re shy and don’t have much practice speaking a foreign language like English. But if you ask for help, they’ll go out of their way to give it.”

Jan appreciated Diane’s advice. She had no idea of what to expect. The six-plus hour long flight was taken up by listening to Diane’s tidbits and descriptions of some of her own experiences in Iceland, watching the loving interaction of Diane with her baby, the in-flight meal, reading the complementary copy of the Icelandair magazine,

listening to tantalizing snippets of Icelandic, noting the Nordic appearances of those who spoke it, and catching a few winks when the cabin lights were turned off. Outside, the plane was enveloped by dark clouds; only the flicker of occasional light reflecting from the engines' burns could be seen. Jan just hoped it would be light enough to see when it came time to land. Diane assured her it would.

“We’re in the time of year in Iceland when the midnight sun keeps it from ever getting darker than dusk. But with the time change, we’ll be arriving early in the morning anyway. If we’re lucky, it will be bright and dry. But usually I’ve encountered gray skies, wind and rain when I’ve landed,” explained Diane.

Jan woke to find the cabin lights flickering on, and the captain announcing their imminent landing in Keflavik. Jan gathered her things into her backpack and practically glued her nose to the window, eager to catch those first glimpses of the island.

Suddenly, they broke through the cloud cover. As Diane had predicted, it was gray but quite bright enough to see. The landscape below was very exotic. Jan could see flat lava fields, distant mountains, fjords and lakes, and no trees. One could gaze in every direction, and see a montage of gray, black, green, brown and beige colors put together with hints of rusty red in an alien pattern. ‘No wonder the lunar astronauts practiced here’ thought Jan in amazement.

The plane duly landed and Jan lost sight of Diane in the hustle and bustle. She followed the crowd

into the tiny terminal and down some stairs to look for luggage. A duty free store was off to the right and Jan saw many walking purposefully in that direction. Others headed to the glass barrier to greet those who awaited them. No one seemed in a hurry. It took a few minutes before the first bags began circling the conveyor belt. Jan went into the store to find shelves stocked with, among other things, candy, beer, liquor, and cigarettes. She saw that most carts were loaded with a giant tin of *Quality Street* chocolates as well as beer, wine or hard liquor. Diane had told her that people bought the candy to share at parties or to give as gifts and bought the liquor as it was so much more expensive once in town. She had laughed and said Icelanders worked hard but liked to party hard, too.

Keeping this in mind, Jan bought a modestly-sized container of the chocolates, then went to find her bag. Not knowing how long she'd be here, Jan had packed a large bag, and relying on the '*Ripples*' book, had brought warm clothes, including her sweater, as well as clothing for wet weather. After her first glimpses of the island, she was glad she had.

Luggage retrieved and placed on a cart, she stood in line to go through the security check. Not everyone was checked. Jan noticed that most were simply waved through, as was she. Once through, she found groups of people lining the room, welcoming people home. She saw a few service men collecting others, Diane among them. Icelandic was spoken almost exclusively now. Signs were illegible but for a few, obviously designed for foreign visitors, indicating bus tickets, rental cars and money exchange.

Jan took advantage of the money exchange and then stood in line to get a bus ticket to downtown Reykjavik. People, both native and foreign, were already hustling to the bus; she followed in their wake. Following their example, she handed over her bag to be stowed in the empty spaces between the wheels, then climbed into the bus and chose a seat midway down. The windows were huge! Although dotted by the spitting, wind-driven rain, it was still easy to see out.

Within moments, they were on their way. The bus was not full, but another pulled in to take its place as they left. Evidently, surmised Jan, they had a routine schedule to follow.

At first, the road cut through intimidating barren, black, bumpy but extensive lava fields. It was very desolate, ugly, alien. They passed between a village to the left, Keflavik, and the American base on the right. The latter was comprised of row upon row of cement block buildings, brightly painted, with nary a tree to be seen. The village, sported smaller buildings, again made with cement for the most part, and here the roofs gave color to the eye; each was painted a different color. Sometimes, to Jan's bewilderment, a long roof had two different colors, red on one half, blue on the other or some other such strange combination.

The road seemed to go on forever, perhaps because there were so few structures or trees to distract the eye. Mountains beyond the lava fields lay off to the right. It was on the coastal side to the left that she now and again saw buildings. And eventually, she began to see ponds and fjords, often with miniature lava pillars thrusting up through the

water, breaking up the coastline. These were beautiful!

Soon after they entered a real town, Hafnarfjordur. The bus decreased its speed and traffic picked up a little, but it wasn't until they entered the outskirts of Reykjavik proper that they encountered a single solitary stop light.

The rain had let up, the sun was starting to peek through the clouds and the road and trees – yes, trees! – glistened, looking newly-washed. The sky quickly turned blue and Jan got her first look at Reykjavik. Square and rectangular-shaped cement buildings marched in rows along this seemingly solitary street. Most had gray, unpainted sides but sported brightly colored balconies and roofs, each different from the next. To Jan, it looked both exotic and homey, nothing like the high-rise infested downtown of Chicago. Here, but for one single building seen on the edge of Hafnarfjordur, none of the buildings she'd seen were higher than four stories. Birch and evergreen trees enveloped the structures and flower beds graced the grassy verges.

The bus stopped before going all the way to the town center. Just prior to turning off into the bus depot, Jan spotted a cluster of buildings that she overheard someone say comprised the University of Iceland. A minute earlier they had passed another complex on the right side of this street that she learned was the main hospital.

After collecting her bag, Jan was pointed in the direction of the town center and saw many wheeling their luggage along, but seeing a row of taxis

waiting just outside the depot, she opted to use one of them. She would go walking once she had gotten checked in and gotten her bearings. She had written the name and address of her hotel on a slip of paper. She handed this to the taxi driver. He loaded her bag into his Volvo, and they left without further ado.

As she had hoped, the driver turned left out of the bus depot and very quickly right again. On her left was a beautifully landscaped park with lots of trees and three ponds. A spray of water graced the first and smallest pond. On the right were homes that had obviously been built some time ago. The trees surrounding them were tall and lush.

The drive was over within moments. The view widened as the park spread out. Jan could see the edges of town opening up before her. A charming little bridge lay between the first two ponds. And in the biggest pond, which lay right up against the first buildings in the downtown area, waterfowl of all sorts swam and waddled, splashed and flew. The buildings were all rather low and many shared a common wall. The facades were painted individually as well as the roofs. The buildings were of very different styles, but comprised what Jan thought of as a uniquely Nordic nature.

Jan avidly looked in every direction until the taxi turned left a little past the biggest pond, following a narrow roadway between buildings which snaked first right and then left to where a square opened up. The taxi pulled in before one of the buildings off to the right. They had arrived at Hotel Borg. The square encompassed a huge green. In the center of the green was a huge statue of a man. The square

was crossed and intersected by walk paths, all lined by flower beds, hedges and trees, and a few benches here and there. It was charming. Even this early, Jan could see people strolling about. Outside tables and chairs hugged the walls of a café on one corner of the square. As the sun climbed in the sky, Jan's urge to get out and explore increased. She didn't plan to waste any time in following through!

CHAPTER 9

Abruptly, Jan realized the rain had stopped. A faint blush rimmed the sky's horizon to the east. Oh, God! She hadn't meant to fall asleep. Precious time was fleeting past. How long? How long had she slept? How long did she have before her pursuer caught up with her?

She grabbed her backpack in the dim light, able to distinguish it easily now from the darker shadows in the well of the seat. She stuffed into it all she thought might come in handy, until there was no possibility of adding more. She thought longingly of her luggage in the trunk but, being the practical person she was, quickly abandoned the idea. There was no way that she could traverse rough terrain or run if she were hampered by her bag's bulk and weight. Besides, all she really needed was already (and always) at hand: maps, her wallet, her passport, her journals, brush, toothbrush and pocket mirror. The opal necklace graced her neck and she was already huddled in her sweater. Everything else could be, and many times before had been, replaced.

Jan wrestled the pack onto her back, checked that the coast was clear and quietly opened the passenger door. Before emerging, she had another quick thought and paused long enough to open the glove compartment, snatched the car rental papers and stuffed them into the outer pocket of the pack. Luckily, they didn't take much space. Now, even with the luggage in the trunk, there was nothing to obviously connect her with this car. That a woman

was somehow concerned with the vehicle was as much as anyone could surmise.

She darted to the edge of the curve in the road. Both directions, from in front and behind her, were clear of traffic. The fields to either side and the road itself were flooded by the storm. Water dripped heavily from the trees and bushes. Streams rushed in the ditches alongside the road. Water flowed across the tarmac and collected in the hollows and dips that pitted it. No matter which direction she fled, it would be a wet one.

Jan looked dismally at her sneakers. But it couldn't be helped. Resolutely, she tramped round the bend, sticking to the pavement for now but ready to drive into the bushes at a moment's notice. She became just one more shadow in the dark, thinking 'every step – another step away from HIM'. She walked to the rhythm: 'every step, every step'. But she knew that before the day was out, she would have to find another means of transport. He was too close. She could feel his presence coming ever closer. She desperately needed to increase the distance between them, to find some place where he wouldn't be able to find her, where he wouldn't be able to follow any more.

She was so weary, tired to her very soul. What had she ever done to deserve this, she wondered for the millionth time. Why was he chasing her so relentlessly? It had been going on for almost two months now. She had hoped that he would give up. But he hadn't. Within days of each stop, she had become aware of him again.

Weeks after she had started running, sure she had finally lost him, she had awakened one morning to find he had left her a note and something more – something to remind her of when all this had begun.

Jan couldn't stop the shudder that wracked her body. She drew the sweater futilely closer, as if to ward off a sudden chill. But this chill bit at her soul, not her skin.

To the beat of her pace, her mind drifted back to that fateful day when she realized that all her running had been in vain; he was still hot on her trail.

CHAPTER 10

She had just left another impersonal motel room, checked out and was carrying her things out to the current rental car. The closer she got, the more she knew that something wasn't right. Unbelievably, both tires on the driver's side were deflated. She made her way around to the other side, only to find the same prevailed there. A closer look showed that all four tires had been punctured. And on the windshield, wafting in the morning breeze was a note. With a shaking hand, and darting a glance around to see who might be watching, she took the folded paper from under the windshield wiper blade.

Jan hesitated before she opened it. She saw no one anywhere in the vicinity; in fact, other than her car and herself, the car park was completely empty. The motel stood alone, just off the roadway. No other buildings were in sight. It was a lonely stop in the road with not even a tree to break the bleakness. She had stopped here simply because she'd been too tired to drive further, not because of any alluring quality of the motel itself.

She focused on the paper she held. Slowly she opened it, dreading what she would find. Her heart was racing. She felt flushed and chilled simultaneously. She leaned back against the car, suddenly unsure that her legs could hold her upright. And she read:

HALLO ELSKAN ☺ WHERE TO NOW?

She closed her eyes, fighting the tears. The note was crushed as her hand convulsed. Oh God, would this nightmare never end?

Jan flinched at the memory. Days had turned into weeks. She had hoped that in her mindless wandering, speeding down one anonymous roadway after another, she had truly hoped, no - actually expected, that she would lose him. If she didn't know where she was going, how could he? But unbelievably, beyond all reasonable expectations, he had found her. How?

The terror she felt now was just as palpable as on that first day. She shook and gasped for air. It was so hard to breathe. Her heart was racing so fast, she bent and clasped her hands tightly to her chest as though to prevent her heart from bursting forth. It was many minutes later before she could gain control of herself.

The rumpled note was still clutched viselike in her fist. The handwriting, the eerie smiley face, the words were so like the first. Even the damage to her tires was the same. Only the locale had changed, that and the fact that the first incident had happened so many weeks before. It was vivid in her mind, as though it had happened only yesterday.

CHAPTER 11

She had just gotten back from the trip to Iceland. The trip had been wonderful! She had even thought of staying there longer but after a month, her sense of duty had caught up with her and she had come home to take up the reins of her life at the library once more.

The trip had revitalized her and she went back to work with a spring in her step and a smile on her face. She had made several resolutions. Henceforth, she was determined to make more of an effort to develop a social life, to be friendlier, more approachable. She planned to take regular holidays. She had decided to renovate Nan's house, make it her own, so she contacted Nan's lawyer, Mr. Tate. By then, the estate had cleared probate; she could do with her inheritance whatever and whenever she pleased.

Mr. Tate helped her to sort out Nan's personal belongings. Some things Jan kept, some were given to charitable organizations, a couple of things Mr. Tate took with Jan's approval. When the house was basically empty, Jan had it painted and repaired, then moved in with her own choice of furnishings and plants. All this took maybe a month. In the meantime, Jan stayed at the apartment she'd rented for several years. The apartment had never become a 'home' – it had merely been a place to eat and sleep when she wasn't working, so it was no hardship to leave it.

Jan had lived in what she thought of as her first real home for a month before she woke one

Saturday and went out to the car to retrieve a book she'd left inside there the night before. What she found was a travesty. The paintwork had been scored, the windows were smashed, the tires were flat, and the upholstery had been slashed. But sitting in pristine condition on the driver's seat was the book she'd forgotten, with a piece of paper sticking out of it like a bookmark.

Jan reached through the open door and gingerly picked up the book. It opened naturally to the inserted paper. There was writing on it. In shock, she read:

HALLO ELSKAN ☺ ENJOY YOUR TRIP?

That's all it said. The Icelandic word startled her. Who knew she had traveled to Iceland? Who had trashed her car and why?

Jan called the police. The two officers, Griffin and Thompson, looked the car over, immediately putting the damage down to vandals. But when she showed them the note, they wanted answers to the same questions as she, and she wasn't able to give them. The police were baffled, especially as she knew so few people and could think of no reason, no motive, for the vandalism.

The policemen looked at Jan suspiciously, sure she was holding some relevant information back, but had to leave with their suspicions unsatisfied in the face of her own bewilderment. They admonished her to get in touch if anything further happened or she remembered anything else.

That was the start. For some weeks afterward, there had been no further incidents, no more notes, but Jan became more and more nervous. She felt watched. And then, one day while checking her mail, she had found a sealed envelope addressed to her, the head librarian of the library. There was no return address. She didn't think much of it at first. She ripped the flap up and removed the sheet of paper inside. And then she froze. In the same block capitals as in the previous note, was written:

HALLO ELSKAN ☺ BE CAREFUL WITH YOUR
BAG.

Jan immediately looked under her desk for her handbag and found it wedged into the farthest corner. As she tugged to free it, something sharp pierced the ball of her thumb. Pain flared. Jan retracted her hand and found a thick splinter of wood still lodged under her skin. She removed the splinter and temporarily covered the wound with a kleenex.

She pulled the desk chair away, retrieved a penlight from the desk drawer and flicked it on. Braced on her knees, she flashed the light under the desk and peered underneath. Concentrating on the corner, she saw that something had shredded the wood there, leaving it mangled and rough. Several wood splinters stuck out; it was obviously one of these that had pierced her hand.

The desk had been Nan's, in place for many years. It was old and worn. The damage could have been there for some time without her knowledge. But Jan thought the scratches looked new. And she had absolutely no idea how her bag had come to be

wedged there. She didn't remember kicking it, nor having gone near it since she had placed it by the drawers earlier this morning. She'd been in and out of the office several times over the last few hours but had not sat down until the time had offered to check the mail.

Jan looked from the note to the desk to her bag. She drew her bag to her and cautiously opened it. At first glance, she saw nothing untoward. She upended the contents onto the desktop and looked closer. That's when she found a small vial with a thin piece of paper twisted around it, held in place with a rubber band.

Jan picked up the vial, removed the rubber band and uncurled the note.

HALLO ELSKAN ☺ YOU NEED TO BE MORE CAREFUL.

Jan dropped the paper and vial. Subconsciously she noted that the vial was a common travel pack of pain pills. She slumped into the chair and began to shake. It was difficult to come to grips with the idea that someone was trying to hurt her, HAD hurt her, and had somehow invaded her office without her knowledge.

Her wound still stung, aching in rhythm with her heartbeat. It flared, calling her attention to it. She got to her feet and automatically made her way to the employee's bathroom where she washed off the blood, extracted a last microscopic sliver and bandaged her thumb. Then she went back to her office and tried to decide what to do.

Her first inclination was to call the police. But then she remembered the skepticism and even suspicion of which she had been on the receiving end the last time. Plus, she really had no more answers now than she had had before.

Instead, she left the office and did a rough canvass of her co-workers. Had they seen anyone hanging around her office or anyone not authorized entering it? No one had seen anyone or anything out of the ordinary, and looked curious at her query. However, Jan did not satisfy their curiosity. Rather, she just asked that they all be vigilant about locking up and left it at that.

Jan returned to her office, slipped the two notes and the vial into the original envelope and then into a larger manila envelope and placed it in her safe. If and when she ever figured out who was responsible, she might need the contents as evidence. She pulled out a roll of duct tape, folded some stiff paper into a makeshift wad, and awkwardly covered the clawed corner until she could have it sanded down and repaired. Then she tried to get on with her day. But she was too rattled.

Finally she gave up the attempt and decided to go home early. She planned to cudgel her brain and use logic to make some sense out of all this. She alerted the staff, then grabbed her handbag and made her way out to her car. The day's shocks were not over though. Her new car rested on a flat front tire. When she popped the trunk to access the spare, she found the spare, too, had been punctured. The knife used to do it still jutted from the rubber, holding yet another note in place. Jan was almost becoming used to the terror inspired by the notes.

Peering at this newest one but not touching it, Jan made out the following:

HALLO ELSKAN ☺ I TOLD YOU TO BE
MORE CAREFUL.

Jan closed her eyes and tried to gain control. She understood none of this! Who was tormenting her?

It was still broad daylight. Several library patrons were coming and going. Cars arrived and left in a regular fashion. It all seemed so normal. And then she opened her eyes and saw the note and the knife. No. This was anything but normal.

She used a kleenex to remove the knife and resolutely put it and the note in her purse. Then she retraced her steps to her office, past startled employees. She closed her office door, added the wrapped knife and note to the safe and called Triple A. It would take them about twenty minutes to replace the tire and spare. It would take them almost as long to get here. She had time on her hands.

A tap at the door preceded the entrance of Jan's assistant.

"Is anything wrong?" asked Candice.

"Just a flat tire and a flat spare," answered Jan. "Triple A's on the way."

Candice's eyes cleared of worry and she said, "How annoying. And just when you wanted to go home early."

“It’s alright. These things happen,” replied Jan.

The fact that it was highly unlikely to happen with a brand new car didn't seem to occur to Candice. Jan was glad. Her breezy manner seemed to go over as planned. Candice went back to work with no idea that anything out of the ordinary had occurred. Jan didn't want to involve the office staff in whatever was going on, but it was taking incredible effort to maintain an air of mild annoyance so she was glad when Candice left after a minimum of explanation.

As Candice closed the door behind her, Jan wracked her brain to discover who might be behind the nastiness. Mentally, she reviewed her life from the day she'd left home for she knew nothing had happened in the first 18 years that could warrant such behavior. She had neither met nor seen anyone other than family from first to last. No, she was sure it could have nothing to do with her family. In fact, even since she had come to Chicago, her life had been totally uneventful until Nan's death and her holiday to Iceland.

Whoever the perpetrator was had to have come into the picture sometime within the last three to four months. And in that time, the only hostile person Jan could remember having encountered was Nan's sister, Mrs. Barrows. It's true that Mrs. Barrows had been threatening. Jan could distinctly remember her shouting *'if you think you're going to get away with this, you have another thought coming!'*

But Jan felt it was ludicrous to think the older woman could have done all the damage or written

the notes. It didn't seem her style. Mrs. Barrows had been blunt and in-your-face from the start. It was doubtful she would or even could stoop to subterfuge in an effort to exact revenge. Besides, the notes sounded 'male' to her somehow. And she knew that Mrs. Barrows did not have the wherewithal to hire someone to harass Jan for her.

This just didn't make sense! The notes all had the Icelandic word *ELSKAN* in common. Now why was that? Could an Icelander have followed her home? Off the top of her head, she could not remember meeting any hostile males while on the island. This required more thought; perhaps reading her journals from her trip would jog her memory.

A knock at the door interrupted her musings. Candice stuck her head round the door and announced the arrival of the Triple A representatives. So Jan collected her bag, thanked Candice, and went outside to supervise, i.e. watch, while the tire was switched and the spare replaced. Twenty minutes later she was on her way home.

CHAPTER 12

When Jan pulled up in front of her house, she was filled with mild trepidation but also resolution. She meant to get to the bottom of this and the first step was to reread her journals. Perhaps there was a clue in them, some incident that she had forgotten.

She trod up the steps to her front door and collected the day's mail. The neighborhood was quiet. No one jumped out of the bushes. No one seemed to be lurking nearby. All seemed normal. Jan relaxed. Her tensions eased and she unlocked the front door and pushed her way inside. Everything looked the same as she had left it that morning. She closed the door and activated the security alarm, kicked off her shoes, and dropped her coat and bag on a nearby chair.

She made her way to the kitchen and started the tea kettle to warm. While it heated, she pulled out a mug and a teabag and placed them on the counter. Opening a cupboard, she snagged an open packet of wholemeal biscuits. She had first tried them in Iceland and liked them so well, she had started buying them once she got back home. Now they were an indispensable part of her daily 'tea'.

Looking at the crackers reminded her of Iceland and subsequently her determination to reread her journals. She took a bite of a biscuit, sipped at the tea, and wandered over to the bookcase in the livingroom where she had kept them.

Rummaging through the books, she couldn't see them. Hunh. They weren't where she thought she

had put them. She flipped through the photo albums to see if the journals had gotten pushed into or behind them by accident but they weren't there. Now Jan started looking in earnest. She looked in the other bookcases, in the magazine rack, on the window ledges and in the kitchen, but found them nowhere.

The only other place where they could possibly be, although she was skeptical, was in her bedroom. She rarely brought books in there to read, much preferring the couch in the livingroom. Still, she couldn't discount the possibility so she headed down the hall. When she came to the door, which was half ajar, she inexplicably hesitated before entering. She shook herself as though mentally shrugging off a bad vibe, and pushed the door open.

Her journals lay on her nightstand. Jan felt silly all of a sudden, as well as relieved. She couldn't remember having brought them in here, but the proof was incontrovertible; there they were. She reached out to collect them. She wanted to read them in the kitchen while relaxing over tea.

When she picked the stack up, something seemed strange. She held three leather-bound spiral journals, but the weight seemed to be off somehow. Jan frowned but proceeded to the kitchen and sat down before fingering the first one open. And then she reared back, badly startled such that the cup of tea in her other hand jolted and splashed her.

The hot stinging droplets grabbed her attention for the moment it took to shake off the hot beverage and rub her arm gingerly on her pant leg. Where

she had been spattered still stung, but not enough to keep her attention away from the journals.

A second time she flipped open the first journal. Inside, someone had carefully cut out the written pages, leaving a blank border all the way around so as to make it appear at first glance that the book was still whole. The empty gap in the middle had been filled with crumbled crackers – the same kind Jan had just been nibbling on.

Quickly, Jan checked the other two volumes. They had been treated the same. Everything that Jan had written about her trip to Iceland had been removed. She checked the trashcans, both inside and out, but the pages were irrefutably gone.

Jan couldn't bear it. Someone had invaded her home, rummaged around in her private things, taken and ruined something that only had meaning to her! How had they gotten in? Why had they taken the contents of the journals? Was that all they'd taken? At the thought, she leaped to her feet and started to look around her more closely. What else had the thieves done? Truth to tell, Jan was almost afraid to look. She already felt violated, unsafe and insecure in her home. And then the awful thought came: were they still there?

But no, she had already been around the house. If someone had still been there, she'd have known. All the doors, even to the bathroom, were wide open. The window curtains were sheer, so no one could be hiding behind them. No, she was alone. But as for the other questions...

Looking down, the crumbled crackers seemed to mock her. She abruptly dumped the messes into the trash bin and almost chucked the ruined journals as well. But at the last second, she thought ‘evidence’ and pulled back. As she did, she caught a glimpse of writing that the crumbs had covered. She checked. Each volume contained only a couple of words.

The first read: HALLO ELSKAN ☺

The second read: NAUGHTY, NAUGHTY

The third read: I’LL BE BACK.

Now Jan was terrified. She was being stalked! No place was safe. She was alone and the violence was escalating, moving closer, becoming all too personal. She had to get out of there!

Jan ran to the bedroom, pulled out the same bag she’d used in Iceland and started tossing random clothes into it. Then she pulled out her backpack and stuffed that, too. She was thinking now, despite her fear, and remembered her passport. She wrapped the journals into a plastic bag and rammed them into the backpack. She grabbed her purse and, at the last, her *lopi* sweater. She carried both bags downstairs and out to her car.

Looking around, she could see no one in evidence, no one watching. The neighbors’ curtains were drawn and the street appeared deserted. Jan raced back up the steps, turned off the lights and locked the door which automatically set the security alarm. This last ironically amused her. The house had been locked before, the security alarm

activated. Yet her stalker had entered unseen and unchallenged, tripped no wires, ruined her journals, taken the pages and left.

She ran back to the car, took a moment to buckle up and drove away.

That's how it had all started. She had driven for hours, until she was too weary to drive any more. Then she had pulled into the first motel she had come to, and slept from pure exhaustion. When she woke, she hopped into her car and drove on. Only when she had to stop for gas had her sense of responsibility prompted her to use the public pay phone to call Candice and let her know that something had come up and she would be gone indefinitely, and that Candice was in charge until her return.

A pattern developed over the next weeks: drive till hunger or exhaustion demanded a break. Then she'd stop for the night at the next motel. The next day and each subsequent day after that was more of the same. No particular destination or direction ruled her path. She just drove, following wherever the road led her.

* * *

Jan remembered those first seconds when she had realized that all the running, the endless being on the move, one eye always peering anxiously behind her, had all been for nothing. Just as she had begun to hope she could get on with her life, *HE* had let her know that she had only been deluding herself.

She had wept in rage that day, in fear. Hope had died and she had started running, mindlessly, blindly. But she knew he was always right behind her. And then she had beaten the fear down until it was a cold lump in her belly. She began resolutely to drive, to stay one step ahead. She *could* do it. She had the means and the money.

She formulated a plan. She would change cars often, use only cash, just another anonymous driver passing through. And one day, she would turn the tables on her stalker. *She* would be the hunter. She would find out who he was and why he was doing this. And then she would expose him. She would methodically collect every piece of evidence he left behind, no matter how small. And once he was caught, it would be enough to keep him in prison for the rest of his days. And she would finally be safe and free to live her life in peace.

But in the meantime, she had to run and keep on running for as long and as far as she could, to survive.

CHAPTER 13

The sun was far up now, and with it, the heat. Jan could hear the hiss as water droplets hit the pavement. One could almost believe the night's storm had been merely a dream.

For some time now, Jan had been pushing her way through the bracken by the road. She could see enough to keep her direction but was, herself, hidden from casual view. But she was eternally vigilant. She monitored the traffic and when any car seemed to slow near her, she darted into heavier cover and barely breathed until it had gone on by. So far, so good.

It wasn't easy going, especially in this heat, but she counted each pace in her accustomed rhythm 'each step, each step'. Slowly but surely, she was making headway, away from HIM. For now, that was enough. Had to be enough.

Finally she had to take a break, eat something, drink a little water, ease her mud-encrusted sneakers off her burning feet for a few minutes. She nestled in amongst some berry bushes, sustaining several scratches in the process. But she felt safe for the moment, sway from prying eyes. It was worth a few scratches. And the sun's rays soothed her.

As she rested and ate, her mind turned back to that first day in Iceland. How exotic it had all been and the start of a wonderful vacation!

CHAPTER 14

Registration didn't take long. Her room emphasized the fact that she was no longer in the States. Rather than a bed topped with blankets, a thick duvet, wrapped in a bag made out of sheets, was provided. Jan looked at it dubiously but decided to give it the benefit of the doubt. But she privately hoped a further search would turn up a spare blanket or two; she didn't want to freeze!

Her room's window fronted the square. The sun was rising in the sky quickly. The trickle of people she had seen when she arrived was fast increasing to a steady stream of pedestrians. When she cracked open the window, she could hear laughter and voices carrying on conversations in a plethora of languages.

Deciding that this was too passive, Jan tucked her *lopi* sweater into her backpack with her wallet and hastened down the stairs to join the throng. Earlier, when she had checked in, the concierge had handed her a street map of the downtown area and marked the location of the hotel. Armed with this and her camera, Jan stepped out to explore her surroundings.

Once she had gotten herself oriented, she headed for the pond off to her left. She caught glimpses of the spouting spray through openings between the buildings so knew she was headed in the right direction. Soon she was leaning over a high stone balustrade, gazing at the ducks, geese, swans and seagulls that abounded in the water, fighting over the bread crumbs cast to them mostly by locals

wearing similar sweaters to her own. Toddlers, firmly held back from the edges of the pond by means of leather harnesses that crossed their chests and connected with long straps, reached towards the water and birds but were held safely distant by their watchers.

Strollers and baby carriages comprised much of the pedestrian traffic and as Jan watched them go by, she often heard what must be Icelandic being spoken. It was unlike anything she'd ever heard before. The mostly young people tended to be mostly young people tended to be apple-cheeked and fair of skin; they looked very healthy and wholesome. Jan wasn't surprised. The air here was clean and fresh! The sky was a piercing blue and it was possible to see near and far with unusual clarity. Jan almost felt drunk on the air alone!

She dawdled there awhile, content to watch the birds and those who walked past but ultimately, she consulted the map and moved off to walk the perimeter of the three-part pond. She thought it was interesting to have a pond right in the downtown. Where the second and third pond sections were separated by an arcing bridge that accommodated both vehicular and pedestrian traffic, she crossed to start on the opposite side back towards the center of town.

According to the map, the University of Iceland (ahead and to her left) lay catti-corner to a graveyard. If she continued walking straight ahead, she would bump up against the wall of the graveyard. Instead, she turned off onto the walkway on the far side of the pond and paused, joining others in admiring the spouting fountain

before moving off through the trees. She saw a couple of statues hidden in amongst the trees and signs that described the many types of birds that congregated in the pond.

She passed the pond, another smaller square that boasted young boys on skateboards, and kept walking until she reached the harbor. Several trawlers and ships sporting foreign flags and names were docked there. She could see one trawler that was being systematically emptied of its catch. She moved closer to watch. The fish filled huge square plastic tubs that were lowered to the dock using a crane. The fish were packed in shaved ice. Workers labored hard and steadily at their task, wearing high rubber boots, and rain gear over lopi sweaters. Jan watched in fascination for a long time. Overhead, seagulls shrieked and whirled, on the lookout for dropped pieces of fish. As they swooped and crisscrossed the sky over the dock and harbor, the dock laborers ignored them.

When she finally got hungry, she headed back towards her hotel but then saw a large number of people clustered around an open window. Every few moments, someone emerged from the mass, carrying what looked like a hotdog and a soft drink. Curious, Jan drew nearer and smelled what they were eating. It smelled wonderful! Her mouth watered and her stomach growled. She joined the crowd, intent on getting her first taste of Icelandic food.

The crowd was exclusively composed of native Icelanders, of all ages. Waiting her turn, Jan took the opportunity to listen to the voices, the language, and direct covert glances at those around her. When

it was finally her turn, she simply pointed to what the person ahead of her had gotten and held out her hand with a few Icelandic bills to pay.

By then, it was obvious to those around her that she was a foreigner. Everyone stared as she took her first bite. When she expressed her delight, they all grinned. One reached out, pointed to the hotdog and said pylsa. It sounded like 'pill-suh'. He said it a couple of times until she mimicked him, receiving an approving smile for her efforts. Another pointed at a picture of the hotdog and the word underneath to emphasize the connection. A third pointed to the lemon-colored drink in her other hand and said 'SEE-nal-co'. The bottle sported the name 'Sinalco'; that one was easier, although the emphasis on the first syllable was unusual to her. Jan would have no trouble ordering this snack in the future. She grinned and walked away, well pleased with her first contact with the natives. This was going to be fun!

Over the new few days, Jan took advantage of the improved weather, now sunny, in the 60s with much less wind, to explore, although she noticed that there was always a breeze near the harbor. Jan took to wearing her sweater and was amazed at how well it blocked the wind and even the occasional shower. Then she understood why it was such a popular item of clothing. It seemed almost all the natives wore one, and where foreigners bundled in winter jackets still seemed to shiver, the natives looked comfortable in their lightweight wool sweaters.

She had also been pleasantly surprised by how warm and comfortable the duvet in her hotel room

had turned out to be. She learned that it was stuffed with goose down. And there was absolutely no need for any blankets. In fact, she found herself sticking her feet out from under the duvet during the night because she had gotten too hot! And yet, the duvet was as light as a feather. She wanted to buy one and take it back home with her.

Since that first day, she had tried many of the Icelandic dishes on offer. One of her favorites was thin sliced smoked lamb served up on flat half-moon shaped rye bread, topped with fresh and dried fruit and fresh vegetables, all with a dab of mayonnaise. She also had tried incredibly fresh plaice with new potatoes. The potatoes were small and sweet, served with fresh creamery butter. But her all-time favorite was roast leg of lamb served with more of the potatoes along with pickled cabbage and homemade rhubarb jam. Yum!

She had gone on a couple of day trips on the bus and seen spouting *geysirs*, a huge waterfall and passed by a magnificent mountain that turned out to be an active volcano. The tour guide, in heavily accented English, told them about past eruptions and explained that Iceland rested on the cusp of a line of oceanic volcanoes that marked the juncture of two plate boundaries which caused daily earthquakes and frequent eruptions, the latter of which were actually responsible for the very existence of the island itself. And the guide told them that the land was still growing. He also pointed out that the natural hot water was used to heat homes over most of the island. And he mentioned that other parts of the island were comprised of several glaciers.

Jan had discovered one of the outdoor swimming pools during her explorations and decided to take advantage of it. The pool was jam-packed with people ranging in ages from infants and toddlers up to white-haired oldsters. The kids raced around and splashed in the shallow pool, the young and middle-aged seemed to congregate in the lap pool and the oldsters crowded into several 'hot pots' which had graduated temperatures, from 39°C up to 41°C. Jan did a few laps then, curious, entered the coolest of the three hot pots.

The round pot was rimmed by a gate made of vertical metal rails with a gap where cement steps lowered into the water. One descended the steps and took a seat on the cement stoop that ringed the pot on the inside. Once seated, the water came to one's upper chest. The water was shockingly hot after the laps, so that Jan descended very slowly. But it felt good in contrast to the cool breeze. Once she was seated, she closed her eyes and just relaxed, listening to the occasional conversation of the older people around her.

She stayed there for about 20 minutes until suddenly she felt overheated. She bobbed up a few times which relieved some of the heat but not enough so she climbed back out of the pot and entered the sitting area of the main pool to cool off a little before leaving.

Inside the women's changing room, she had discovered that the showers were communal which had made her somewhat self-conscious at first, but after noting how at ease all the people around her were, she soon relaxed. The long lockers and wooden benches fronting them were just as jammed

with patrons now as when she had first arrived. It was obvious that the swimming pool was a favorite, despite the cool weather.

She explored several of the museums including an outdoor one that featured very old preserved buildings. Inside some of those buildings, people dressed in traditional costumes demonstrated the old skills of carding, weaving and knitting, candle-making, and the fashioning of shoes. Jan also saw the baking of traditional crepes which were then served up to the visitors with a homemade blueberry jam and whipped cream filling.

Eventually, she left the capitol area and flew north to experience another part of the island. Akureyri was the largest town in north Iceland. It was a beautiful town, from the church that rested at the top of a long column of steps down to the downtown and the harbor. The downtown seemed to have one main street and no stop lights. But the cars drove very sedately and always gave way to people crossing from one side of the street to the other.

Jan compared the church in Akureyri to the incredibly high-towered church that dominated Reykjavik and found it no less impressive, if less grand. But she liked the tiny old church she had found while out walking even more. It couldn't have held more than 20 people at a time and was tucked back among some trees on the street below the hill. It was seemingly rarely used, only for special occasions such as a christening or a very private wedding ceremony. It was possible to go inside. The wooden benches looked very old, numbering four or five rows to either side. The

floor was bare wood, too. Still, for all its barrenness, Jan found it cozier than the big church far above, and much more interesting as it spoke of the past.

In the evenings, Jan saw a strange phenomenon downtown: young people would congregate on the main street, both on the sidewalks and in cars. Periodically a car would stop, someone would get out and someone else would get in. Then the cars would drive around to the start of the street and drive down it again. This happened over and over; it was obviously an important social activity for young people in this town. To Jan, it was very foreign and rather odd.

Walking away from the downtown lights, she was quickly enveloped in the moon and starlit darkness. Looking up, her eye was caught by sudden movement. Above her the famed northern lights danced in the sky: greens, blues, and pinks swirling, breaking up, reappearing and creating new patterns that misted over the stars, muting them but not totally obscuring them. Jan watched, mesmerized until her neck began to get a crick in it. Rubbing her neck, she walked on, stealing glances upward as she made her way back to her hotel.

One evening she'd gotten dressed up and attended the solitary nightclub. She noticed not everyone was allowed entrance. At first she thought it might be an age thing, but upon looking at those rejected, that surmise didn't hold water. But then she noticed that they were wearing casual clothes. Watching from her place in line, sure enough, the doormen were passing those dressed nicely through. Then

she was glad that she had decided to wear a dress and heels.

Inside, she found a small table on the upper floor near the rail where she could watch the young couples mingling and dancing to the live band below. She ordered a soft drink, paid, and then was left in peace to enjoy the ambiance and the action.

When Jan left Akureyri, she boarded a bus heading east. Although she was ultimately headed back to the capitol, she wanted to see more of the island. Through the huge windows, she watched an ever changing landscape unroll before her. Akureyri had been lush and green and pleasantly warm. The farther east she got, the hotter, drier and dustier it became. The towns were much smaller, really just small communities, even that from where the ferry destined for Europe departed. While there, Jan saw both cars and pedestrians boarding. She stayed overnight, catching the next bus early the next morning.

Now the bus drove in a southerly direction, following the island's coastline. The skies turned grey and a persistent mist enveloped the bus making it difficult to see more than a few yards in any direction. But now and then Jan glimpsed the countryside. The road, mostly hard-packed gravel and dirt, was occasionally washed out or pitted with deep pools of water. The air grew colder. And then Jan caught sight of the edges of her first glacier.

After several hours travel, the bus turned off the road for a break, stopping by a small bay that rested at the base of a glacier. Walking along the sandy shore, Jan could see several bergs floating in the

bay. Intrigued, she paid to go on a boat ride, getting very close to the bergs. The guide told them it was dangerous to get too close as what they saw was literally just the tip of the icebergs, and the bergs were wont to rise and flip without any warning.

The bus drove on. A few seats in front of Jan, an Icelander took it upon himself to inform his foreign seatmate of the some of the history of the area, pointing out significant spots where something had occurred in the sagas. Jan heard it all; it added spice to the drive, especially when they drove through mile after mile of monotonous flat graveled plains, cut here and there by thin runnels of water. Past that they took another small break by a huge waterfall. Everyone descended to view the waterfall and a few brave souls, including Jan, climbed up, under and behind the waterfall, emerging damp but enthused on the other side.

They drove past more glaciers, closer to the coastline now, and Jan caught a glimpse of mountains and peaks far across the ocean. Intrigued, she pointed and asked the driver what it could be. His English wasn't too good, but he seemed to understand her question well enough to gaze at the peaks and adamantly say: Westman Islands. The drive continued between high mountains on one side and the ocean on the other until they reached Vik, Iceland's southernmost village. Jan walked the path to the ocean and saw the strength and speed of the rushing tide. Seagulls dove and screamed at anyone who came too far out; Jan overheard someone say laughingly that the gulls were protecting their ground nests.

Jan chose to stay in Vik overnight. It would take another five or more hours to reach Reykjavik from there and she was in no hurry. She wanted to relax here by the ocean. Vik was very small, nestled at the base of a mountain, the entire village visible from the rest stop. A church seemed to guard the town from its vantage point above maybe a couple of dozen homes, all on the opposite side of the road. It was very quiet and peaceful. She could see a couple of falcons soaring near the cliffs and a few sheep grazed the grass along the roadside. When the bus left her behind, the only other people she saw were those manning the fast food counter. They directed her to a bed and breakfast type room that infrequent visitors could rent for a night. In actuality, it was a room in one of the private homes. She ate a light meal at the rest stop, walked through the village and up to the church, and back down to the ocean. Finally tired, she retired to her room to sleep.

The next day she had to wait until after lunchtime for the bus to appear, but as it was a Sunday, she took the opportunity to answer the call of the church bells and sat through the service, accompanying the woman who had rented the room to her. She didn't understand a word of the service, and couldn't join in the singing, but for all that enjoyed the service. The pastor wore a long light colored gown with a stiff ruff around his neck. He prayed, he sermonized, he lit candles. It was different from what she had seen in the States, but was still obviously a church service. Most of the town's residents seemed to be there, some in the audience, some in the choir. It was a touching service, and as she exited the building, the pastor shook her hand along with everyone else's as they passed by.

After changing into more casual clothes, she thanked her hostess and went to the rest stop to await the bus. She ate a light lunch and had just finished when the bus arrived. She joined the passengers for a last glimpse of the ocean before they drove on. The drive passed isolated turf-covered buildings and small churches, and drove through several small towns, none as small as Vik, but still taking no more than 5 minutes to enter and exit, before rural countryside took over again. Along the way, Jan saw many sheep but few fences; the sheep grazed and roamed where they wanted, usually in groups of a ewe with two lambs by her side. Their wool hung long and ragged. And while the lambs seemed nervous when the roaring bus passed, the ewes barely raised their heads from grazing or where they lay at rest, obviously well-accustomed to the sound and smell. Jan also saw horses and a couple of times passed riders who were herding several horses with foals along the roadside to some unknown destination. These the buses passed very slowly and warily. The horses seemed to Jan to be more the size of ponies and their gait was like no other she had ever seen.

Finally they reached Hveragerdi. It was a good-sized town, chockfull of greenhouses. The town lay at the base of a very high mountain, one the bus needed to mount to continue on to Reykjavik. The bus lumbered up the steep slope, ever slower as the pitch increased. The land to either side fell away until the road seemed to balance precariously between them. Cars routinely passed the bus. Jan was amazed at how quickly they moved, but then realized they weren't moving all that fast; it was just that the bus was moving so slowly. No, all the traffic proceeded at a cautious pace until they

reached the top and solid ground once again enclosed the roadway. Jan heaved a sigh of relief. The long drop-always had made her very nervous.

The rest of the trip to Reykjavik was much more prosaic, a relatively straight drive through retracted mountains. But Jan did notice high white plumes of steam rising off to the right. She surmised that these were somehow connected to harnessing the natural hot water.

Jan was glad to once more descend the bus and make her way back to her hotel. She relaxed there for the rest of the day. The next day, once she had regained her energy, she took a bus to Thingvellir, where Iceland's original parliament used to meet centuries before, its members then arriving after several days' walk or by horseback to address legal matters, criminal issues and to enact laws. Thingvellir was a beautiful area, dotted here and there with tiny summer cabins. After a thirty minute drive, they reached the main area.

Opposite to the viewing platform, one could walk down the original entrance, a wide graveled lane between high walls of natural rock that then opened up to a vista bisected by a river. Tucked close under the hillside on the near side was a hotel while on the other was a stately looking building meant for meetings between Iceland's prime minister and heads of state from other countries.

Wood planks crossed the streams and people were free to walk and explore both sides of the river at their leisure. Once Jan crossed, she could see a few tents along the bank. Evidently the area was also used by campers. Jan followed the path along the

river, mounted tufted hummocks to view the lava-sided deep pools. She leaned over the sides of a low bridge and stared into the incredibly clear water. It was so clear she could see tiny fish darting from one underwater clump to another. Many coins had been flipped into the water and the sun glinted back from their shiny surfaces. It was like getting a private view into life underwater. Jan stood there for quite a while before reluctantly heading back. Along the way, she saw sweater-clad Icelanders busily picking at something on the ground. When she got closer, she saw they were picking little black berries that grew along vines there and scarfing them as fast as they picked them. She reached down and plucked a couple. The berries were little bigger than the size of a grape pit, black in color. But they exuded a reddish purple juice when bitten. They weren't all that sweet, but she could easily imagine eating them in yogurt or making a jam out of them. She started watching the ground more closely and saw blueberry vines as well. She even found a few berries, but they had not ripened yet so she left them untouched.

Jan had, by that time, been in Iceland over three weeks. She knew in her bones that she must leave soon. It would be hard for she had come to love it there. She would make one more foray before flying back to the States.

She decided to fly to the Westman Islands, off the southern coast. She had been intrigued by their outlines on the bus ride and wanted to see them up close. She also wanted an aerial view of some of what she'd been seeing on the ground. The flight was over almost before it began. But she saw the harbor and where a volcanic eruption had covered

part of the town. Brochures were available that described what had happened. When Jan walked to that side of the island, she could see the mounds of ash. Incredible for her to realize those mounds covered whole houses! She then took a boat ride that circled the harbor, entering one of the seamounts at its outer edge. It proved to be hollow and lanterns were lighted to illuminate the sides of the cave. A few of the passengers made sounds to hear them echoed back.

She walked around the island, and saw kids swinging on long ropes from one cliff to another. Then she returned to her hotel for a dinner featuring whale meat. The taste was not fishy at all. Rather, it reminded her of beef. She slept well that night – it was very quiet and serene. The next day she flew back to Reykjavik and reserved a flight home. Then she spent the rest of the day shopping. There were a few things she wanted to take back with her, particularly a duvet along with several of the coverlets specially designed to fit them. And she wanted at least one book featuring photographs taken round the entire island. There were several on offer and she chose a couple of them to take back with her, along with a couple of translated works by Icelandic authors, one of prose and one of poetry.

There was much she had yet to see and explore, but it would take years to do it properly. She knew she'd be back and often. A piece of the island was lodged in her heart. Diane had been right, she reflected. Contrary to first impressions, the people of Iceland were generous, warm-hearted people, eager to help and quite welcoming.

CHAPTER 15

The sound of a motor called her back to her surroundings. Something about the approaching vehicle raised her hackles. The car slowed, not far from where she crouched. And then something was flung from the open window, whereupon a mocking laugh faded away as the car picked up speed and disappeared from sight.

That laugh. Had she heard it before? She couldn't latch onto any particular memory but something about it was familiar enough to strike a chord.

Jan waited several minutes to see if the car returned or any other approached. But all was quiet but for the occasional call and flap of wings of the birds living in the hedge.

Cautiously she rose to her feet. A parcel, wrapped in brown paper and sealed with tape, lay on the roadside near her refuge. After putting her sneakers back on, and keeping a constant eye open, she made her way out of the bushes and pushed her way through a small gap until she could step out onto the road.

She approached the packet and wasn't totally surprised when she saw her name on it. There was no denying her hands trembled as she reached for the bundle, but she had to know what it contained.

Without a knife or a pair of scissors, it was difficult to remove the tape but she used her keys to

saw at it and finally got one side open. Inside, she could see paper, tightly mashed together. She worried at the tape until, at last, she was able to remove the entire wrapper and pulled the contents free.

On top, as expected, was another note:

HALLO ELSKAN ☺ DID YOU LOSE THESE?

Delicately she lifted the note away and looked down on the missing pages of her journals. She checked. Yes, to her relief, they were all there. But as she shuffled the pages, she discovered something hard was embedded at their center. She carefully removed the top layer. A knife lay there. There was something brown on the blade. It flaked off when it shifted.

Jan trembled. She had the awful feeling the flaking bits were blood. Hesitantly she lifted the knife away, using a spare kleenex from her backpack. Underneath was a thin scrap of paper upon which was written:

HALLO ELSKAN ☺ YOU'RE NEXT.

Jan almost dropped the knife in shock and horror. Oh, God, oh, God! She gasped for breath, prayed for help out of this nightmare. She wept, the missing pages clasped close as she knelt there. Her mind kept going round and round. 'You're next, you're next.'

What could she do?

He knew exactly where she was. She was on foot. He had a car. He had weapons and, looking with eyes widened in shock at the stained knife, he was determined to use them – on her.

She didn't know how long she knelt there, lost in shock, but the sound of an approaching vehicle abruptly brought her to her senses. 'Oh, God,' she thought, 'he's coming!' She raced back into the bushes to where her backpack still lay, heart pounding so loud she was sure it could be heard.

It took her a few moments to realize that the approaching car was coming from the safe direction. It could not be her tormentor returning; it was coming the opposite way. But it still took her a long time to catch her breath, calm her frantic heart and collect herself. By then, the vehicle was long gone.

CHAPTER 16

Jan was neither stupid nor naive. She had simply had so little exposure to the world that many ideas and possibilities had never occurred to her. As a result, she had never satisfactorily discovered how HE had continually managed to track her down. Now, aware that the final confrontation was approaching, she was driven to find the answer. And by mere chance, she was starting to get a glimmer.

That last night in the motel, she had chanced on the television room. The television was on, a newscast was just starting. She had had nothing better to do so sat down to watch and listen. She was unaccustomed to watching television – it had never been a part of her life.

She found it interesting, this first real exposure to the media. So when the newscast ended and a movie began, she continued to sit there and watch. The movie was about a funny spy, fast paced, easy to follow, and humorous. Although broadly it was a chase story, it bore no resemblance to her own situation so it did not occur to her to find it uncomfortable to watch. Rather she was fascinated and amused.

Now, as she thought back to that movie and its improbable ideas, she remembered how, at one point, the spy had held up a tiny round metal button and explained to his female counterpart how they could attach this to a car or a person and then be able to follow them remotely. Then he had held up

another and called it a ‘bug’, saying it would allow them to hear everything the person who carried it, said.

The movie had been silly, absurd, a mere flight of fancy. But Jan began to wonder if such things – bugs – really existed and could do what the spy had said. It would explain a lot.

All the time she’d been running, she’d only had one constant with her: her backpack and its contents. Still thinking the idea absurd, she reached for the backpack and upended it onto the pile of papers before her. She sorted through the contents. There was nothing there that she hadn’t placed there herself. She picked the bag up again, and ran her fingers around the inside seams but nothing lay there. She checked the outer pocket but again came up empty-handed. She was beginning to feel very foolish when she thought to check the straps. Could *HE* have attached something to them? But, no. She’d been right the first time. The idea was just a piece of someone’s overactive imagination.

She dragged the bag closer to start stuffing things back in when a loose thread on one of the armbands got caught. She tugged at it in exasperation. The thread had been getting irritatingly longer and longer lately. She’d have to cut it off and re sew the seam. Then she froze.

Slowly, she turned the band over to where the thread originated. Probing with her fingers, she palpated the thick padding. There was something hard, a mere nub under the thickest part of the padding.

Jan ripped the thread away. Subsequently, the lining came undone and the seam gaped open. She reached inside and, hardly daring to breathe, withdrew a slim metallic button, no larger than the tip of her finger. It looked very much like the one in the movie.

This then, this was how he'd managed to track her! Contemplating the innocuously looking disc, Jan suddenly felt a rage so intense she wanted to howl in her fury. But she didn't. She breathed hard and gritted her teeth. She remembered more of the movie.

The spy's female accomplice asked how the 'bugs' could be deactivated. The spy answered that they could be immersed in water or squashed. But then he had raised a cautioning finger. To try and trick an adversary, the bug could be removed and then placed elsewhere, still active, to lure the tracker while one got away. Jan remembered how the female had looked amazed and so admiringly at him and how she herself had laughed at the female's naivety.

Jan thought grimly, now, that that advice was going to come in handy.

She was tired of running. But at the same time, she wanted the coming confrontation to be where and when *she* decided, not her adversary. So she would not destroy the bug, not yet. She carefully slipped it into the outside pocket of her backpack and zipped it closed so it could not fall out.

Methodically, she checked for further bugs but didn't find any. She repacked her bag and calmly

exited the bushes to hitch a ride with the next driver to appear from the safe direction. She kept walking till a family in a station wagon pulled over and offered her a lift. Thirty minutes later she was in a small town in Indiana, a mere hour's drive from a major airport.

She grabbed a taxi, not caring about the cost, and directed him to drive her straight there. Once at the airport, she took the first plane available back to Chicago. She took another taxi straight to her house. It was just as she had left it. A thin layer of dust covered everything but she didn't bother with it for now. She headed directly to the phone and called the police, asking to be connected with one of the two officers who had handled the report on the vandalism of her car.

When officer Griffin came to the phone, she asked that he come by – she had information for him. He said he could come by after five; it was then a little after 4 p.m. She thanked him and hung up, called yet another cab and went to the library.

Ignoring the startled looks on her staff's faces at her abrupt reappearance after more than six weeks absence, Jan headed straight to her office and retrieved the envelopes of evidence collected there. Without a single word, she left, and had the waiting cab whisk her home again.

Minutes after she got there, Griffin rang her doorbell. She made sure it was him before she opened the door.

CHAPTER 17

“Has there been another incident?” he asked, resignedly, pulling out his notepad.

“No. Yes. Please, come in. It’s a long story and I can’t tell it standing in the doorway. HE may show up at any moment,” replied Jan nervously, looking over his shoulder at the street beyond.

Intrigued but still looking a bit put-upon, Griffin entered. Jan immediately shut and locked the door before leading him into the kitchen. Barely waiting for him to be seated, she spent the next hour relating what had been going on and showed him the notes, the knives, the mutilated journals, the retrieved papers and finally, the bug.

At first, he tried to interrupt, to ask her why she hadn’t been in touch sooner, but she gave him a steely look and continued her narration to the end.

You can check these out for fingerprints, compare them with what you took off my car. But more importantly, we can catch him. He’s been tracking me. He’ll know I’ve come back home. He’s already on his way. You’ve read the notes. I’m next. You have to stop him.” Jan stopped, exhausted. She had no more words. She just sat there and looked at the police officer, waiting for something, a response, a look, a comment. Something. Action.

Griffin could hardly believe the tale she’d related. But he couldn’t refute it, not with all the evidence before him, and the vandalism he’d seen for

himself. He'd have to check it out and protect her until he could prove one way or another if she was a victim or a crazy person elaborately seeking attention.

He said, "Alright. I'll check these out."

Jan nearly collapsed in relief. Tears she'd held back for so long threatened to burst.

He said, "Take it easy. First things first. You can't stay here. He's already, according to your story, breached your safeguards here."

Jan moved to protest the word 'story', but then subsided. Nothing had been proven yet. He was entitled to his doubts.

"Is there anywhere you can go, anyone you can stay with?" he queried.

At her denial, he sighed. "Then we'll have to do this the hard way. Grab your things. I'll take you to a motel."

At her alarm, he reassured her. "It's alright. There'll be undercover officers there watching. We'll keep you safe."

She grabbed her backpack and stood waiting for him to lead the way to his car. He looked startled at her quick response but didn't comment. Gingerly, using a kleenex to avoid adding to the fingerprints on it, he placed the bug back into her bag, and helped her gather up the evidence. These he retained himself.

Without further ado, he led her out to his car and drove her to a motel. He made sure she got a room on the second floor and took the connecting room himself. Then he called for backup. When the officers arrived, all in plain clothes and driving their own cars, Griffin chose one to take the evidence back to the precinct for processing.

Griffin and Jan ordered room service and shared it in her room. Then they sat back to wait. The connecting door was left ajar. Griffin went into his room to allow Jan some time to rest. She took a quick shower and then lay down on the bed to rest but it was some time before she could relax enough to sleep. But eventually, nerves and exhaustion caught up with her.

Two days passed. Griffin began to get antsy. Despite all the corroborating evidence, he still wasn't 100% sure that Jan was still being stalked or even, for that matter, in danger. The brown stain had proven to be paint. So far, vandalism, three innocuous knives and a few creepy notes were all Jan had to offer. The rest they had only her word for. With each additional hour that passed, it was beginning to look more and more questionable.

Finally, Griffin had to go back to work. He left a couple of officers on site and advised Jan to sit tight a bit longer. But if nothing happened over the next couple of days, he said she could go home. He advised her to change the locks and security code. Then she should be as safe there as she was here. It was the best he could do, given the circumstances.

Jan had no choice but to accept his decision. She didn't agree with it and still felt full of terror and hopelessness. She had already suffered so much. To have it all considered a figment of her imagination crushed her.

She squared her shoulders. If she had to fight on her own, then so be it. She watched Griffin drive away and sensibly followed his advice. During the next two days, while still under the protective eyes

of the two remaining officers, she had the security code switched and the locks changed. Then she quietly went home.

At home, she hadn't been there long before Candice called, wondering what was going on and whether she was coming back to work or not.

"There are several pieces of mail personally directed to you. Shall I have them sent over?" queried Candice.

"Yes. I'll be out of the office for the rest of this week, but I should be back after the weekend," replied Jan.

"Great, see you then," replied Candice, making no effort to conceal her relief at Jan's words.

CHAPTER 18

It was tempting to allow herself to relax. She'd come home again and nothing had happened. Perhaps she'd lost him in the last mad rush getting here. Maybe it wasn't as serious as she'd thought. Perhaps Griffin was right. It was possible that all the terrorizing had just been someone out to get their jollies, using suggestive notes and vandalism on a random target. She wished she could make herself believe that.

Jan shut all the curtains, made sure the windows and doors were latched and took a hot shower. Then she went to bed, not even bothering to turn out the light. Sleep claimed her immediately.

* * *

She came awake to find a man wearing a black ski mask bending over her with a knife in his hand. His eyes gleamed darkly in the light. The mocking laugh, the one she'd heard before, filled her ears. Her tormentor had arrived. The confrontation was at hand.

He motioned to her to sit up. She did, pressing her back as far into the headboard and away from his menacing presence as she could. Her heart raced and she found it hard to breathe.

He sat down on the side of the bed, twisting the knife this way and that, staring at her, but saying nothing.

“Who are you? Why are you doing this?” asked Jan in a barely audible whisper.

“Don’t you know me?” came his mocking rejoinder. He reached up and pulled off the ski mask. “How about now?”

Jan started. She *did* know him!

“Kevin? Kevin Lyle?” exclaimed Jan in a shakey, amazed voice. “But you’re one of my assistants at the library! Why would you torment me like this? I thought you liked working at the library. I thought we had a good relationship.”

Kevin replied, “I did like working there. Very much. I liked working with *you*. But then Nan died and you became *Miss Uppity*.” His eyes reflected his anger. “No longer did you speak to us lowly assistants. You had your personal assistant do it for you. And when you were choosing a personal assistant, did you consider one of us – me – for the position? No! You didn’t. You didn’t even think of the possibility. You never even asked.”

He went on, “Remember what you told us at Nan’s wake? How she took a chance on you? Well, how come I didn’t rate a chance? Didn’t you think I was good enough? Smart enough?”

With each question, Kevin’s anger seemed to grow. Each comment was accompanied by a slash of the knife, cutting the air, flashing in the light. Jan jumped with each one.

Jan tremulously tried to defend herself. “I’m sorry, Kevin. I didn’t know you were interested in

the position. You're right. I didn't ask. Nan had just died and I couldn't think straight. I accepted the first person I interviewed. I'm sorry."

"Sorry? Yes, you're going to be sorry. I made it possible for you to move up and how did you repay me? With nothing!" railed Kevin.

Jan looked up as his words penetrated. "What? *You* made it possible... Kevin, what did you do to Nan?!"

Kevin looked vaguely uncomfortable. "Nan was an okay librarian but she got in the way. She was going to last another twenty years. I would have had to wait forever to be your assistant! So I just gave her a little nudge, a bit of my dad's digitalis. Boom! She just keeled over."

By the end of this recitation, Kevin no longer looked uncomfortable. He looked vindicated, gratified and proud. Jan could barely stand to look at him.

His face turned dark. "And then you ruined it. You just left, leaving that bitch Candice in charge! And when you got back, you shared out a little candy and expected us all to be grateful little assistants for your condescending generosity. You expected us to just ignore the way you had treated us – me. Well, no way! You treated us – me – like dirt and now you get to find out how it feels!"

His voice had turned colder, more resolute. He was eyeing her like a piece of meat he had already decided how to slice and he looked eager to begin.

Jan tried to keep him talking. Somehow, she thought that if she could keep him talking, that dreadful knife would be held in abeyance.

“How did you keep finding me? I was so careful to leave no trail,” she asked breathlessly.

Kevin took the bait. For the moment he stopped playing with the knife. His face reverted to flushed pride.

“Ah. That. I’m an amateur detective,” he slyly admitted. “I’ve been collecting gadgets and learning how to pick locks and bug people for years. My mom gave me my first kit when I was twelve. I can get in anywhere,” he boasted. “Plus, I have a friend who works at the security company. It was a piece of cake to just happen to show up and help him set up the new security system – twice – for you. He didn’t have a clue.”

“But why did you take my journals?” asked Jan.

Kevin looked uncomfortable again. “I was really mad when you went away without a word. I was the one who put away those books on Iceland that you borrowed so I knew where you’d gone. And when you came back, you looked so happy. I wanted to know why so I decided to borrow them. Good trick with the rim, don’t you think?” he grinned, once again ending with a smirk on his lips. “There’s an exchange student from Iceland on campus and she taught me that word. Neat, hunh?”

“Yes, you completely fooled me. And I wondered about the word,” admitted Jan.

“Kevin, can’t you forgive me? I promise I won’t ignore you ever again. And I’ll help you find a job to your liking. Everyone deserves a chance,” pleaded Jan.

Kevin hesitated. But then his face set with resolve. “No. You had your chance. And now you must pay the price. Nobody can treat me like that with impunity ever again. You have to learn your lesson.”

He swiped at her with the knife. But she threw back the duvet, blocking his move, and the knife caught in the material and fell to the floor. Jan whimpered and rolled to the opposite side of the bed. She picked up the lamp for want of something to protect herself. When he stood upright after reclaiming the knife, she threw it. Kevin dodged but didn’t entirely escape the launch. The edge whirled him around and he swore.

Jan picked up the water glass that rested on the bedside table and prepared to throw it, too. But before she could, an explosion sounded. The bedroom window cracked loudly as the glass shattered. Kevin slowly continued his turn to face her. A red blotch, ever widening, filled his shirt front. His eyes expressed surprised wonder. He tried to speak, then toppled face forward onto her bed.

Jan just stood there, ready with the water glass should he be tricking her and come up slashing again. But he didn’t. He didn’t move at all.

A sound at her window made her whirl anxiously. But her defensive posture relaxed when she

recognized officer Griffin looking back at her. He nodded towards the front door.

Jan eased around the bed, still vigilant, until she exited the bedroom door. Then she ran to open for Griffin. He looked her over quickly for obvious wounds, then cautiously and quietly made his way to the bedroom, gun at the ready.

His first shot had been successful. Kevin Lyle lay dead where he'd fallen. He'd never bother Jan again.

Griffin called for an ambulance and a coroner, then led Jan to the kitchen. He seated her, and made her a cup of tea. He snatched a blanket from the livingroom and bundled it around her. Throughout, she never said a word, never moved. But her eyes were focused on the doorway, wary that Kevin might come charging through. She was in shock.

After a while, she looked at Griffin and asked wonderingly, "How did you..?"

Griffin smiled. "I took a page from his notebook. I placed bugs all around your house. I've been watching since you moved back in. I also had a monitor on the security alarm so I knew when he breached it. I waited till you were out of the line of fire. He was a brightly lit target. Hard to miss."

* * *

Days later, Griffin showed up at Jan's front door.

“I thought you might like to know what we found out about Kevin. His fingerprints match those of the vandal, both on your car and on the desk at your office. It was easy at work as he had access to everything, to slip you the notes and the vial, slash your tires and shred the desk. No one ever suspected him. Why should they? He was a reasonably good looking 23 year old college student, with no obvious reason to hurt anyone or anything.

But evidently he had a troubled past. His mom died when he was twelve and his father didn't think much of him, constantly putting him down and yelling at him, according to the neighbors. So he grew up with a chip on his shoulder and a huge inferiority complex. You were just unlucky enough to first be worshiped and then to be found to be merely human after all with no interest in him. He was crushed, and his worship turned to hatred.”

Jan flushed at this last. But it was true. She had to work on being more open and considerate of others.

“So it's really over?” she asked, needing confirmation.

“Yes. It's really over. And I'm sorry I doubted you,” said Griffin.

“Thank you - for everything, for my life,” Jan responded, gratefully, sincerely.

“So what will you do now?” He asked.

“I can’t stay here. Or even at the library. Too many dark memories.” She hesitated. “He said he killed Nan. Did you hear that?”

“Yes. I’m very sorry. He was a seriously disturbed person,” replied Griffin with sympathy. “But you’re safe now. You have to try and put it all behind you.”

“I don’t think I will ever feel truly safe here again,” she replied wistfully. “I was never cut out to live in a big city anyway. I think I will have to find somewhere where I can find peace of mind, somewhere small where I know everybody around me. Maybe then...” she said bemusedly.

She looked at Griffin. “Thank you, officer Griffin. Thank you very much.”

Griffin nodded and left. There was no more to say.

EPILOGUE

“Mr. Tate, I want to thank you for all your help. Without first Nan and now you...,” began Jan.

“You’re quite welcome, Ms. Vane. Are you sure you’ll be okay over there? Iceland is a small country. You will always be very much of a foreigner there,” he pointed out.

“I know. But it draws me. The land is harsh yet beautiful. The people work hard but they are simple in their love for their country and understand how one can become attached to it. There’s room for one more, even if that one isn’t native born. I’ll be fine,” Jan concluded with a smile.

She reflected, “I need the peace and harmony I found there. I need the quiet life. There I can retreat to perfect solitude whenever I need it. They respect that over there, one’s need for privacy and time to reflect. You know, when I left to come back here, it felt like I was leaving my home, not coming back to it. Iceland claimed my heart. It’s my home.”

And then with complete certitude, she reiterated, “It’s my home.”

THE END

