

Flekklaus

Chapter I.

Reykjavík 1985

Helga was sitting against the wall in the break room of S. Meyvantsson & Co.'s warehouse, with her legs flat on the floor and leaning a little bit to the left. She was dressed in a black velvet skirt and a bright yellow, short-sleeved shirt, with prominent shoulder-pads. A yellow and black silk scarf was tied delicately around her neck. Her pale, thin arms lay limply by her side and she had an air of vulnerability as she sat there with one shoe off. The shoe lay beside her on the brown felt carpet, the leather on the blue heel so worn that you could see through to the metal underneath. Her tights had ladders snaking up both thighs but her auburn hair she always took such pride in, fell in soft curls down to her narrow shoulders. At this angle it seemed longer on the left side.

Gulli got such a fright that he almost fell down the stairs. Rúna, close behind, almost tripped over him. She slapped a hand over her mouth to suppress a giggle. This was their first summer working for S. Meyvantsson and the first staff party for both of them. Rúna had just turned sixteen and had gotten the job through family connections. She was mostly there to run errands and make coffee, but every now and then she got to cover for one of the girls on the switchboard. She thought that was amazing. Gulli was eighteen and worked in the stock room. They'd never met before but had been making eyes at each other all night. The guy running the mobile disco 'Oh-Dolly' had everyone working up a sweat on the dancefloor. The party had escalated in accordance with the loud music and the decreasing amount of sickly sweet, yet deceptively strong, pineapple punch served in large plastic bowls. Gulli and Rúna, spurred on by Dutch courage, had gradually danced towards each other under the blinking lights. At first their dancing was stiff and awkward, until a hit song by the band Grafík came on and they could sing along with the lyrics at the top of their lungs. "Sixteen and you'll see me at the movies/Oh, oh, oh, sixteen and you'll see me..." Finally a slow song came on and they moved into a corner.

-I know a place, Gulli had whispered and grabbed Rúna's arm. He'd led her out of the office building, in through the warehouse and the workers' break room, all the way up the spiral staircase to the warehouse attic. Up there was an old folding bed some of the older men used to nap on after lunch. Rúna had wanted nothing more than to back out at that moment, but that would have been so pathetic and childish. She pushed that feeling deep down inside, like she always did whenever something felt uncomfortable. She took a large gulp of the punch they'd brought with them out to the warehouse and thought to herself that at least the story would sound adventurous to the other girls when school started back in the fall. She'd have to try and get a picture of Gulli to show them how cute he was, all tall and dark with the most

beautiful eyes. Then they would change their opinion of her and she'd finally be accepted. She could still hardly believe Gulli had chosen her and wanted to do her best to make it worth his while. She moved her tongue in circles and tried to ignore the choking feeling she got when their noses pressed against each other making it hard to breathe.

The long and fumbling snogging session was interrupted by a sudden noise. They could hear someone walking around the warehouse. The teenagers tried hard not to make a sound. The tension was fun, a welcome break from what had gone on before. For courtesy's sake Gulli kept fondling Rúna's breasts in between sips from the bottle. Every time they made eye contact they had to suppress the fits of giggles threatening to erupt while they listened for any sound from the ground floor. After a while everything went quiet. They waited a little before inching up to the spiral staircase and sneaking back downstairs. That's when they saw Helga. The usually quiet secretary who had gone completely wild that night.

-Ugh, grim! Rúna said as she fluffed up her perm with her fingers. She opened up her purse to fish out a well-worn Viceroy pack and lit a cigarette. -She was totally wasted tonight. Talking nonsense to everyone. Did you see her? Rúna inhaled so deeply that she choked and doubled over coughing. She had only just started to smoke and didn't really like it so far. Gulli didn't answer but stared at the woman in an attempt to focus his eyes. The fuchsia lipstick was foaming at the corners of her mouth and she had black circles under her eyes.

-She's passed out, he said. -Let's leave her. She must have stumbled in here to sleep it off.

-She's going to feel terrible tomorrow I bet, Rúna snickered and took a long drag of the cigarette until her eyes stung. -She was crazy drunk, always yelling about something. Totally hammered!

-Come on, I can't be bothered. Gulli tried to get Rúna to stand up. They were both too drunk and what had happened between them on the top floor had been embarrassing. Rúna looked at him, tried to smile, look cool and hide the suffocating uncomfortableness that threatened to overwhelm her.

-Do you see that? Gulli pointed to the secretary with his lighter as he lit a cigarette. Just over the woman's right ear there was a bald spot.

-Woah, that's sick! He gently pulled on a lock of hair, causing it to slide further down. They couldn't believe their eyes and giggled nervously. Gulli pulled the hair again, a little harder this time so they could see the skull better. Helga's thick and lustrous hair was a wig after all! They both burst into loud laughter. Rúna regained control first and slapped a hand over her mouth. Ashamed of her laughter she felt like a horrible person.

-She could have a disease or something. We should help her get home, she muttered and stared at the woman. Gulli nodded.

-Hey Helga, wake up! You need to go home, he said, his voice suddenly shaky. There was something odd about this whole thing.

The secretary didn't move. Rúna crouched down, wet her thumb and tried to wipe off the smudged mascara under Helga's eyes. She wet her thumb again and did her best to do the same on the other side. She gently stroked Helga's cheek. She could smell the faint mix of perfume and alcohol coming off her.

-Helga you need to get to bed. We'll find a taxi for you, she said. When Helga didn't respond Rúna stood up. -I don't feel great either, she sighed and started to make her way outside. She just wanted to leave. Get away from this situation.

-Hang on... We have to get her home! Gulli was getting anxious and grabbed Helga's sweater so hard he almost ripped it. -You can't stay here tonight Helga! he said loudly and let go of the sweater so suddenly that Helga slid further onto her side and into a pile of boxes on the floor. Her wig got caught and was pulled even further back.

-Holy shit! I think she might be dead for real! shouted Gulli and yanked his hand away like he'd been burnt. He started trembling. -I'm going to go see if I can find someone, he said and vanished through the door.

-Helga, please talk to me, pleaded Rúna and took her by the shoulders. -Wake up! She started shaking the secretary violently as tears started rolling down her cheeks. -Helga... I'll freak out if you don't talk to me! The woman showed no sign of hearing her. Rúna started to pull on her arms to get Helga to stand up but quickly realised it was a lost cause. -Wake up, she cried, - Please wake up.

Gulli came rushing back inside and grabbed Rúna, who had turned pale. -Leave her be, he said. -Let's get out of here. We're not supposed to be in here anyway!

-Did you find someone? Rúna kept weakly tugging at Helga's arm.

-No, let's just go! He was obviously frightened.

-Shouldn't we call someone? she whispered. It felt like it should be his decision. Her eyes stared at him, childlike and pleading. He paused for a moment before walking over to a black telephone in one corner of the room. He hesitated before picking up the receiver. He pressed a button and waited. He pressed the button again and again. -There's no dial tone!

-Just call an ambulance, said Rúna and took a deep breath, all the way down to her stomach. She tried to hold it and count to thirty. If she could make it to thirty she'd be alright. If she didn't make it bad things could happen. It was a ritual she'd had since she was little. Twenty, twenty-one... she felt her chest tighten, twenty-two... getting light-headed, twenty-three... she had to breathe! She reached into her purse for another cigarette, hands shaking. She sucked the smoke deep into her lungs and tried to calm down. She made smoke circles, something she'd recently learned how to do, until Gulli slammed the receiver down with a loud bang.

-Call the police, maybe you don't need a dial tone to call them. She made an effort to make her voice seem steady. -What's that smell?

-Of course you need a dial tone, the phone's just unplug... Look, it's been torn out of the wall. Can you smell that? Is something burning? Rúna's reply drowned in the noise of the pile of boxes collapsing. Helga was now lying on the floor, just as peaceful on the brown felt carpet, her auburn wig by her side and her silk scarf draped over half her face. She had faint laugh lines around her mouth. The last box fell to the floor and the warehouse was silent once again.

Smoke started to fill the room and a crackling sound, like from a fireplace, was getting louder. In just a few minutes the wall behind Helga was completely ablaze. The kids ran as fast as they could and didn't stop until they were far, far away.

In this moment neither Rúna nor Gulli understood that the memory of the shining bald head, and the net of the wig holding every intricately placed hair would haunt them, day and night, for years to come.

Chapter II

Småland, Sweden 2014

Guðgeir hurriedly rifled through the contents of the box. On top there were colourful balls of yarn, knitting needles and a measuring tape all tangled up together. He pushed his hand further into the box until his fingers touched paper. He pushed the knitting stuff aside and found a stack of letters underneath. Most of the letters were thick and as far as he could tell all the envelopes were the same. He grabbed one and held it up to the light. Kirsten Petersen's name was written in a delicate cursive on the front. The writer had taken special care with the capital letters, which were formed out of intricate curves and lines. The letters had been sent to an address in Stockholm. The envelope had been opened with a pen knife. When he pulled out the handwritten letter a small photograph fell to the floor. He quickly picked it up. The photo showed a young boy, dressed in a parka, with a woolly hat on his head. Guðgeir recognised the house he was standing in front of, the Hljómskálinn pavilion in Reykjavík. As he put the photograph back in the envelope he realised that the stamp on it was Icelandic. He tried to make out the date but his eyesight failed him. He thought about going to get his glasses in his bedroom on the first floor but decided against it. His palms were sweaty. Kirsten could be back any minute. She had gone on her daily trip into the village to do the shopping. Guðgeir looked at the back of the envelope but there was no information about the sender. He put it back into the stack and had a quick look at the others. All the letters seemed to be from the same person. Under the last letter he found an old Icelandic I.D. card. Guðgeir could barely make out the faded black and white photograph underneath the worn plastic cover and the date of birth was illegible. He scratched at the plastic in an effort to get to what was underneath. He'd almost gotten a hold of it when he heard the front door slam. He threw everything back in the box, tried to position the knitting correctly over the stack of letters and put the lid back on the box. The drawer slid back with a loud noise. He walked back to his seat as quietly as his condition allowed. His breath was laboured and his hand shook as he ran it across his forehead. He swallowed hard. Why was he so on edge? He felt so out of shape,

both physically and mentally. Damn illness! He heard sounds coming from the front room and the cat's meowing was answered with affectionate murmurs. Kirsten entered with a bag full of shopping. Her long blond hair reached all the way down to her waist.

-How's my guest doing today? she asked in her sing-song Swedish and put the bags down on the counter. Her delicate face was flushed from the walk and make-up free, apart from her coral lipstick. She had different coloured hair-ties spaced evenly all the way down her long ponytail to tame her thick hair and her light, flowery summer dress did nothing to hide her curves. A voluptuous woman.

_I'm fine, answered Guðgeir, still a little short of breath.

-Would you like anything else? I can make more coffee, she watched him patiently.

-No thank you, no need. You spoil me, said Guðgeir and glanced at the chest of drawers. The drawer was shut. When he picked up his mug he realised a piece of paper, part of an envelope, was stuck to his thumb. He put it in his mouth and pretended to bite his nail.

-I'll miss you when you leave, Kirsten said and wiped the perspiration from her forehead. -It is so warm out there today. She got herself a glass of water and drank it down in one gulp. - Who knows, I might end up opening my own Bed & Breakfast! I love having guests in the house.

Guðgeir nodded politely. -Are you sure you want all the stress that comes with it? he asked and gestured to the shopping bag he now knew always contained the same things. -It's one thing having one or two guests and being able to just go down to the village shop to do the shopping. It's a whole different kettle of fish having a house full of people, coming and going at all hours. There are so many issues that can come up in that situation and not everyone is as even-tempered as I am!

Kirsten smiled sweetly and picked up his coffee mug. It had a flower pattern on it, like a lot of things in her house. -You're right, it might just stress me out, she said. - And that's something I don't want in my life anymore. After I moved here to Småland I've nearly forgotten what stress is! Maybe you should extend your stay Guðgeir? Rest up a bit more before you go back to the police station. And all that stress! She laughed sweetly.

-I guess I better go when Inga comes to get me. But I'm glad I ended up here with you, he was sweet-talking her on purpose. But he wasn't lying, he was really glad. He'd booked a room in Maja's B&B, but it turned out that they had overbooked. Maja had blamed the online booking system and offered to find him accommodation elsewhere at no extra cost. Grateful for the offer he and Inga hadn't had the strength to make a big deal out of it and drove the short distance to the other place. The two storey house, surrounded by trees, looked like something out of an Astrid Lindgren tale.

-Oh how cute! Inga had exclaimed regularly as they'd caught glimpses of houses through the trees on their drive through Småland. Guðgeir stayed silent. He found the landscape monotonous and was dreading the stay. Inga had left the next day and the first few days had

been rather dull. But he soon started chatting to Kirsten and lately their conversations had started to get more serious. Guðgeir told her about his work with the Icelandic police force and opened up a little about his cancer struggle. She was easy to talk to.

-Yes I've enjoyed my stay here, said Guðgeir. -It's good to get away from the hubbub back home. I have to admit that I found the first few days a bit boring but that's all changed, and I've clearly started to relax a bit more. He repositioned himself in his chair and they smiled at each other.

For the two weeks he'd stayed at Kirsten's Guðgeir had barely left the house or seen anyone else. The houses here were few and far between and it was too far for him to walk on his crutches over to the nearest village, Emmaboda. He had nothing to do there anyway. He'd gone over to Maja's B&B a couple of times to watch TV in the lounge there. Kirsten didn't have a television. She seemed to live a humble life, an almost puritanical one, although he had yet to find any signs that she was religious. In a small shed in the backyard he'd found tools for glassblowing. Everything was covered in dust and he'd never seen the kiln fired up, but had gotten confirmation that the glass ornaments around the house were made by Kirsten. He assumed that was how she made a living. She could hardly be making enough money by housing the odd guest when Maja's was full or by helping out over there on busy days.

In two days' time Inga would be here to pick him up and even though the stay had definitely done him some good, the mundane days were starting to get to him. Yesterday he'd found Kirsten bent over a drawer on the living room table and her panic when she realised he'd seen her had sparked his interest. When Kirsten had gone out to the store that morning he couldn't fight the temptation to see for himself what was in the box. He finally had something, a small mystery, to occupy his mind here.

-It's beautiful out here, he said, to say something and looked out the windows with false admiration. -Were you raised around here Kirsten? She stopped putting the shopping away and turned to him. There was a strange look in her eyes.

-I lived in Stockholm but had had enough of running for the tube and the endless strain of living in a big city. Me and my boyfriend at the time decided to move and the real estate prices around here were really low. We got this big house for next to nothing, but there was a lot that needed to be done for it. A real fixer-upper! You should have seen the look on our faces when we realised what we'd gotten ourselves into. He ran off pretty quickly after that! Disappeared like the old insulation! She shrugged and laughed in a way that seemed to say 'good riddance'. -I wouldn't be able to keep up with the maintenance if I didn't have Jonas here to help me.

Guðgeir pictured the short, blond man he'd seen doing odd jobs around the house. He'd last seen him up a ladder painting a window frame. But Kirsten had been the only one tending to Guðgeir. He found it easy to relate to her, felt almost like he'd always known her. A charming woman and a simple life. Maybe he and Inga should change gears and simplify their life.

On the third day Maja had come over and offered him a room at the B&B, since one of her guests had checked out early. Guðgeir declined. As strange as it sounded he'd felt like he'd be betraying Kirsten somehow. And he liked it here, even though the days could sometimes feel very long. But there were days where he felt impatient and wished he'd just gone to some health care facility in Iceland, instead of running off to Sweden while Inga attended some law conference in Copenhagen and then went off to see her friends in Berlin. The idea of getting a complete rest somewhere no one knew him had surfaced one night at the kitchen table when Inga had found an article on Småland in the travel section of the newspaper. She'd thought it all sounded very charming. They had eventually convinced each other that Guðgeir going to Sweden to rest and recuperate was a great idea. It would do him good to get away from everything. Far away from people with their sympathetic looks and the job he sorely missed.

They'd landed at Kastrup airport in Copenhagen, driven over the bridge to Malmö and then up north to Småland. The next day Inga took the same route back. Guðgeir stayed behind and for the next few days he slept a lot, ate healthy meals and read all the books he'd bought at the airport. He'd also done his exercises, taken two long walks a day and was even starting to run short distances. He could feel his strength coming back after the cancer treatment. A zest for life had replaced the fear of death and he knew that the past few months had changed him. He looked at Kristen sympathetically.

-Tell me about it. I live in a nice old neighbourhood but there is always something needing to be fixed in the house and endless bills to pay. And they only seem to get higher while the wages stay the same, he said in a friendly tone. -Do you know anything about Iceland? He tried to make the question sound casual.

-No. nothing. Kirsten seemed particularly bored by the question. - I just know the capital is Reykjavík.

-You've never met anyone from Iceland over here? He sounded surprised.

-No, said Kirsten and played with the heart shaped locket she wore around her neck. Red blotches had started forming on her chest and were spreading up her neck. The red blush on her tanned skin was turning him on. It had been a long time since he felt that. He forced himself to look away.

-Not even any Astrid Lindgren fans? She was born around her wasn't she? Guðgeir ran his tongue over his lips to wet them.

-Yes in Vimmerby, it's a bit too far away. People going there wouldn't stay with Maja.

-And you never met an Icelandic person in Stockholm? Guðgeir was persistent but smiled as if to apologize for old habits. He could tell she was getting angry and her temper excited him.

-No! What's going on? Why are you so obsessed with Iceland and Icelandic people? She slid a hand under the collar of her dress to fix a bra strap that had slipped.

-There's so few of us over there that we're pretty convinced that we're the centre of the universe. He tried to make it sound funny but all he could think about were the letters in the box. They were sent from Iceland.

-No I don't recall meeting anyone from Iceland before, let alone having them stay here. This place isn't exactly a popular destination. We mostly get people from around Sweden. She ran her fingers along a wooden cutting board covered in breadcrumbs. The thick crust had scattered everywhere when Guðgeir had cut himself a slice. She put a large piece of crumb in her mouth and chewed slowly. The coral lips moved sensually. Her fingers were long and graceful and on her ring finger she wore an unusual gold ring with a green stone.

-I'm going to put this away if you're finished. He could smell the faint smell of soap when she leaned over to take his mug. Soap, not perfume, he thought and watched her walk over to the sink and turn the water on so carelessly it sprayed onto the floor. Her firm behind shook a little as she scrubbed the mug vigorously with a sponge. Guðgeir's breath quickened. He'd always had an eye for the ladies but made sure not to let those kind of thoughts get out of hand. He knew how easy that could get to be a habit. He thought about how happy he was with Inga, how he could talk to her about everything and how much he loved her. Inga had everything he could ever want and their life together was good and fulfilling. He wouldn't change a thing. They were just getting over the torrent of troubles that had been his illness and he was looking forward to spending time with her again. He looked intently out of the window and tried to focus on something other than Kirsten. Inga would be here in two days.

-Is he completely deaf? He asked and sat up in his chair to see better out the window. The ladder Jonas had been using was lying on the grass.

-Who? Kirsten wiped her hands over her hips to dry them, leaving wet patches on her dress. She walked over to the window and looked out.

-Jonas, your handyman. Guðgeir could sense the heat from her body.-I thought I saw you talking to him in sign language.

-Yes he was born deaf, she said.

-As far as I could tell you're fluent in sign language. For some reason he felt a need to compliment her. - That must be nice for him.

-Nice? She sat down on the windowsill and fixed him with a stern stare. -Just as nice as it is for you when someone speaks Icelandic. I'm the only one here that can talk to him. He was forced to learn how to speak as a child and it was hard for him.

Guðgeir understood the dig. He kept eye contact as he leaned back in his chair.

_Of course sign language is just like any other language he said slowly and hoped Kirsten would notice how open-minded he was. -My Swedish has gotten a lot better since I came here to stay with you. He meant the last part as an emphasis on how he didn't think sign language

was any different from other languages. He felt it was important. There was something about this woman that made him want to look good in front of her.

-And your foot is a lot better too. You haven't used this for days, she said and gestured to the crutch he'd been using when he first came, but was now leaning against the wall in the kitchen.-You're a new man. She gave him a quick smile and Guðgeir again detected the faint smell of soap as she brushed past him and went outside into the sunshine. His heart quickened.