

Monday, March 16, 2015

The skeleton was pale yellow. Cloth remnants hung from the bones in some places, but they were mostly disintegrated. Around the hipbone was a leather belt with a buckle made of dark metal. The skeletal remains had no doubt been lying there for a long time. I switched off my flashlight and pulled my head out of the opening of the narrow passage.

We were in the basement of an old house in the Reyni district, where the dead man's bones were discovered. The house had been built in the early 1800's and so the basement ceiling was low. The owner had only recently purchased the house and had begun renovating to make more space. Since both the house and the land around it were protected, the owner was not allowed to expand the building ground nor add a top floor.

And so all that was left was the basement, where the slanted foundation meant the width of the floor was only half the size of the ground level. The basement had stacked, stonewalls that were whitewashed. And while they seemed quite level from the outside, there were three walls on the inside that were very uneven. The wall further up tilted slightly because the stones were smaller, making the wall look more like a stone fence. The openings were nevertheless filled with cement and the wall was whitewashed just like the rest.

The new owner had imagined that it might be possible to cut and drill into the rocky ground, making the basement at least two metres high. If he was able to take down the wall towards the slant, then it was likely he could get a few extra square metres.

The man had only managed to free one stone loose from the wall when he discovered an opening behind it. This, he thought, was rather peculiar, since it wasn't characteristic of people from the older generation to waste space. He had already been slightly perplexed as to why they had built around the slant in the first place, seeing that it wasn't a bearing wall. When he had pulled a few more stones out from the wall, he caught a glimpse of something on the inside. At first he couldn't really make out what it was but when he shined his flashlight in through the opening, there was no doubt – there, lying on a shelf-like mound was a human skeleton.

It was Sunday evening and the man wasn't sure what to do. He had called his wife, but her answer hadn't helped the situation one bit. She had said that if there were corpses in the basement out at Reyni then there was no way she was moving from Argir. He had therefore gone home to try and talk to her but she wouldn't budge. She was not setting foot in that basement or in that house for that matter. It had been his idea to move closer to the city and now it was his mess to clean up. It was way past dinnertime when the man entered the Seaside Police Department and told them what he had found. The woman on duty wanted to know if the remains were from a recently deceased person. The man didn't think so since there were only yellowish bones and decomposed fragments. The officer decided that this wasn't exactly an urgent matter, seeing that the skeleton had been in the basement for years. She told him the police would come by the house in the morning and asked he be there as well.

It was almost noon and the police chief, Anton á Heyggi, and I were alone in the basement. Jón Jensen, the chief criminal investigator had just left, along with the pathologist from the National hospital. The pathologist had said that as far as she could tell, the skeleton was perhaps a hundred years old or so, but she couldn't make any accurate evaluations until the remains were at the hospital. And then off she went.

Before anybody had the chance to say anything, the criminal inspector said that this was the perfect case for the Skansi Department. The inspector himself and everyone else at the station would be over-burdened later in the week with all the tourists coming to see the solar eclipse. The police

chief agreed and then Jón Jensen was gone.

I hadn't said a word but I felt cornered. It's not that the Skansi Department and I didn't have time for the case – I just didn't want Jón to be the one who decided what we were supposed to do.

"Don't let it get to you, William," Anton á Heyggi said with a little grin. "Be happy you've got something to do." The police chief was a stout man in his mid fifties with grey hair and a beard. His eyes were the same shade too.

"Yeah, I guess you can look at it that way," I said and glanced at him, knowing he wasn't born yesterday. "It just doesn't sit well with me to be under Jón's thumb."

"I know, I know. But if the three of you from the department look into this case, then there's little chance you'll rub Jón the wrong way – or vice versa," he added.

"Now I think you're being optimistic. We haven't investigated one case yet where that criminal bastard hasn't stuck his nose into things!"

"There's no doubt that Jón thinks you guys are the ones who are out of line." Anton stuck his pipe in his mouth and bit down hard on it. Without lighting it he continued, "Jón is difficult to deal with, but he's no simpleton. If you just stick to the case everything will work out fine."

"That's easy for you to say," I answered and walked outside with Anton á Heyggi at my heels.

"You know it is possible there is a completely natural explanation as to why a skeleton is in that basement," Anton said, partly trying to console me. "Somebody in the house died and the remains ended up in the basement."

"Coincidentally? With a stonewall built up against it?" I replied wryly.

"You heard what the pathologist said about the bones being old. A good century ago there were quite a lot of eccentric characters living out here in Reyni. You've read the books written by your namesake. According to him there were only pranksters and lunatics living out here a hundred years ago. It wouldn't be difficult for someone like that to stick their deceased grandfather or father down in the basement."

"People would have noticed," I muttered in defense.

"Of course, *someone* would have noticed, but most of the people were from villages. It would have been easy to just say the old man had gone back to Viðareiði or Dalur or wherever it was he came from."

I didn't feel like agreeing with Anton but frankly didn't mind getting an assignment.

Just then my mobile rang. It was the pathologist.

"Has Jón Jensen left?" she asked hastily.

"Yes, it's just Anton and me here."

"Good, because I have something to tell you. I didn't want to mention it while that bully from the Criminal Department was there. I can't stand the sight of him."

*Now that's something we can agree on*, I thought to myself.

"Of course I haven't examined the skeleton yet, but I can tell you this much – the remains are from a male and he was killed. His neck was crushed."