

Escape
27th March

The wind battered the jeep as its wheels fought to keep a grip on the road's icy surface. On one side was the mountain slope and on the other a sheer cliff above the sea far below. It was dark and the blizzard outside roared. Sajee held on tight to the steering wheel and tears streamed down her cheeks. She could see only the white flakes spinning towards her out of the darkness and for a moment it occurred to her that it was time to give up, walk out into the teeth of the storm and leave the snow to pile up and cover her. She could let herself drift into unconsciousness before they could catch up with her. She could fall asleep in the cold and dream her way to the warmth of home. She glanced into the mirror and moaned at the sight of her face, swollen, the cuts turning septic and the clumsy stitches.

'I will,' she whispered to herself, feeling the old determination return. 'I will go home,' she said, out loud this time as a gust of wind made the car bounce. She gripped the wheel so tightly that her knuckles turned white as she cautiously put her foot on the accelerator.

1
27th February
Travelling to Höfn, a month earlier

A friendly looking man sat next to her, fair-haired, wearing a white shirt and a patterned jacket. He had a beard that was bushy but neat, and held a paper coffee cup in one hand. His eyes went from the aircraft's window to the back of the seat in front, and back again. It looked as if he was trying to stare the flight out, just as she was. The turbulence had started ten minutes after takeoff. First the aircraft had shuddered for a long while, until it took a deep dive. Sajee snatched at the man's hand and hot coffee spilled all over him.

'I'm so sorry,' she said, letting go of his hand and transferring her grip to the seat's steel armrest. He took a serviette from the seatpocket and wiped off most of the spilled coffee.

'Did it burn you?' she asked, mortified. 'I'll wash your shirt for you.'

'It's all right. I have a washing machine,' he said with a mild, beautiful smile.

He was a handsome man, but with generic features. His hair was cropped close at the sides, but thick on top and a fringe flopped over his forehead. He looked at her with curiosity.

'You speak Icelandic?'

'Just a little,' she mumbled. That wasn't true, as she had a good command of the language, but often people failed to understand her because of her mouth. Right

now she hardly trusted herself to speak, not until she had solid ground under her feet again.

‘You’re travelling alone?’ he asked, leaning towards her.

She nodded cautiously, not sure that she was ready to shift even slightly in her seat.

‘What takes you to the east at this time of year?’ he asked politely, without seeming to pry.

‘Work,’ she gasped.

‘Where?’ he asked.

‘At a beauty salon.’

‘Really?’ he said with a note of surprise in his voice. ‘In Höfn?’

‘Yes.’

He gave her a warm smile.

‘It’ll be over soon. Just try to take deep breaths and relax,’ he said, patting her hand. ‘Don’t try to fight it. Go with the plane’s movement instead of tensing up against it,’ he said sympathetically.

She tried to follow his advice, until the aircraft began to shudder again.

Sajee had little experience of travelling by air – or travelling at all. This was only the second time she had been anywhere. The first journey had been the long one, all the way from Sri Lanka to Iceland. Now the aircraft’s metal frame shivered and the lights above the seats flickered, people took deep breaths and small children wailed. Over the crying she heard the pilot make an announcement over the loudspeaker. She wasn’t able to make out his words, but sensed the tension around her. The aircraft dropped sharply, banked hard and climbed so quickly that the airframe shook.

She kept a tight grip on the armrest with one hand and reached with the other for the sick bag in the pocket in front of her. She vomited a slimy liquid containing the remains of the sandwich she had eaten at Reykjavík airport. She felt her companion lifting her hair with both hands away from her face while she retched into the bag. She remembered little more of the flight until the bumpy landing at the Hornafjörður airport. Not a sound could be heard inside the aircraft apart from the whine of the engines and the squeal of wheels on tarmac. The children had stopped crying and the adults sat stiff in their seats. The aircraft taxied slowly up to the airport building and a round of applause broke out as it came to a halt.

Soon she stood exhausted among the pale-faced passengers waiting for her suitcase. The man who had been next to her on the flight came over, wearing a coat zipped half-way up. A dark brown stain on his shirt front gave her a pang of guilt.

‘Can I offer you a lift?’ he asked.

Sajee was so taken by surprise that she declined, speaking in her own language before realising what she had done.

‘No, thank you. I’m being picked up,’ she said in Icelandic. ‘I’m so sorry about the coffee.’

The man laughed and was about to say something else when a dark-haired older woman came to stand by them.

‘That was appalling,’ she fumed. ‘The plane should never have left Reykjavík!’ Others around joined in to agree with her, arguing loudly that passengers deserved counselling after a flight like that. The man took a card from his pocket and put it in Sajee’s hand.

‘Thank you,’ she said, looking at the drawing of a house overlooking a blue sea. The door was framed within a handsome portico and flanked by large flower pots filled with flowers. He looked at her questioningly.

‘Is it difficult to read?’

Sajee nodded.

‘I run a guest house here in Höfn, called the Hostel by the Sea. If you’re in trouble, come see me,’ he said in a low voice. ‘My name’s Thormóður.’

‘Thank you,’ Sajee said and backed away. She was sure she smelled bad. There was vomit on her sweater and on the brightly coloured scarf around her neck. When her large, black suitcase finally appeared, still wet with snow, she took herself to the toilets, relieved that nobody from her new workplace was there to see her. She unwound the colourful scarf, pulled off her sweater and leaned over the sink to wash as well as she was able. She brushed her raven hair and put on a clean sweater from her suitcase. By the time she felt she was presentable, the arrivals area was practically deserted. Through the window she could see where her companion on the flight was standing by a Land Rover, and the angry woman with the dark hair was still talking. The man had a look of resignation on his face. He finally got into the car and drove away, and before long there was only one car left outside the airport building.

2

27th February

Höfn airport

She went outside the building, but it was too cold to stay there so she went back inside, taking a seat on a sofa upholstered in fake black leather. The man ought to be here to collect her soon. A hunched, skinny man with brush-cut hair was finishing some paperwork behind the reception desk.

‘That was quite a landing,’ he called out and disappeared through a door with a box in his arms. Sajee nodded her head in agreement, but the man was already gone. She was alone in the arrivals lounge and closed her eyes. A few minutes

passed and she was almost asleep when she realised the man was speaking again from where he sat tapping at a computer behind the desk.

‘It was pretty bad and the passengers don’t like it, but there was never any real danger,’ he said. ‘It’s rarely like this in Hornafjörður, so it’s understandable that some people get more upset than others.’

He laughed again and went back to his work. For a while only the whine of the wind could be heard. Sajee checked her phone. Nobody had called or sent a message, so she walked over to the window and stared out.

‘Can I help you?’ the man asked, looking up from his computer screen.

Sajee hesitated and looked down. Her long black hair fell over her face.

‘You understand Icelandic?’ the man asked, as if he had only just registered her appearance, switching to English. ‘Can I help you?’

‘Yes, I speak Icelandic,’ Sajee replied. ‘I’ve lived here for a few years,’ she explained.

‘There are so many foreigners here now,’ he said. ‘Are you working here?’

‘I cleaned houses in Reykjavík,’ Sajee said.

‘Well. And you can make a living doing that?’ he asked.

‘Yes, pretty much,’ she said, pleased that he could understand her. Often she had to repeat each sentence, which could be exhausting. Sometimes it was easiest to say as little as possible. She stood up and went over to the window again. There was nothing to be seen in the parking lot, so she took out her phone, but could reach neither Kristinn nor Liu. After a couple of unsuccessful attempts she went back to the sofa.

‘Could you help me get a taxi?’ she asked, tucking her hair back behind her ears.

‘There’s so much snow that I won’t be able to carry my case if nobody comes to collect me. I don’t understand what’s wrong. I’ve tried to call again and again.’

‘There’s no taxi around here. There was a couple in Höfn who ran a taxi, but they gave up in the autumn. Hopefully someone else will start up in the spring,’ the man said. ‘Where are you going?’

‘It’s a beauty salon here in the town,’ Sajee said, repeating the words in Icelandic and then in English as the man raised an eyebrow.

‘Understood,’ he said with a laugh. ‘I’m Sveinn, by the way.’

He laughed again, but not at her. It seemed to be a habit, finishing each sentence with a short snort of laughter.

‘My name is Sajee,’ she said, trying to smile. ‘It’s sometimes difficult to speak clearly, because of this,’ she said touching her upper lip with her index finger and covering her mouth. It was an old habit she struggled to break. As a youngster she had not only covered her mouth to speak to strangers, but had let her thick hair fall over her face like a curtain.

‘Couldn’t you get that seen to?’ Sveinn asked. ‘It doesn’t look that bad.

Probably wouldn’t even have known it was there if you’d had treatment right away...’ He hesitated, and barked with laughter. ‘Well... these plastic surgeons

are so smart, they can do pretty much anything,' he said, looked ready to laugh again, and stopped himself, as if realising that it was time to let the subject lie. 'My father didn't have much money,' Sajee said. 'Things in Sri Lanka are very different.'

She said no more, knowing that people frequently didn't give themselves time to listen to anything more than the most straightforward explanation, either interrupting her or else their attention wandering elsewhere.

Sveinn leaned on the desk and looked at her without speaking. She ran a finger under the hair tucked behind her ear and let it fall over her face. His attention went back to the desk in front of him.

'Is that right that you're going to a beauty salon?' he asked after a pause, a smile at the corner of his mouth.

'Yes, I'm starting work there,' Sajee assured him. 'I'll be doing pedicures, massages and that kind of thing. I'm good at this work, and learned it all at a really good salon. Lakmal, the owner, would only have the best people working there.'

She hesitated when she saw that Sveinn had a curious look on his face and assumed that he hadn't understood.

'And what's this salon called, the one you're going to work at?' Sveinn asked with the usual laugh, this time a little forced.

'It's called the Hornafjörður Beauty,' she said. 'It's on the main street.'

'I don't know the place. This isn't a big town and I know pretty much everyone here.'

'Wait a moment,' Sajee said, fumbling for the phone in her bag and going over to him. She quickly scrolled through the messages and showed him the old phone's cracked screen.

'I'm going to buy myself a new one. When I have been paid,' she said apologetically, searching for the right message. 'I think it's this one.'

Sveinn took the phone and read the message. His brow furrowed and he squinted to read it a second time. 'Hornafjörður Beauty,' he said out loud. 'I've never heard of it,' he said and this time his laugh sounded forced. 'Is that all?'

'No,' she said and shook her head. 'There are two more messages. They're next, look.'

A heavy finger tapped at the phone.

'I had forgotten how difficult it was to read anything on these tiny screens,' he muttered, elbows on the desk. He moved the phone closer to see it better. 'Ah here's another one from the same number.'

'That's right,' Sajee said. 'It says that Kristinn who owns the salon will meet me at the airport.'

'I see that, then there's the same text as in the other messages,' he said and passed the phone back to her, a serious look on his face. 'I know a few people of that name, but not anyone in this kind of business. You didn't get any paperwork? A business card, or a leaflet like the ones over there?'

‘No, just text messages,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘But Liu, the woman who rented at the same place as me in Reykjavík, said it’s a good place to work,’ she said, lowering her voice without finishing what she had meant to say.

‘Liu?’ Sveinn asked, clearly intrigued.

‘She’s Chinese and helps me read the messages because I don’t read Icelandic. Liu helped me buy the ticket for the flight here.’

‘And what’s her link to this salon?’

‘Her friend worked there but had to leave. I’m supposed to take over her work and the apartment where she lived.’

‘So that’s the way it is,’ Sveinn said, looking at her and scratching the back of his neck. ‘So you can’t read what’s here in your phone?’ he asked, hesitating as if he were anxious not to offend her.

‘No,’ Sajee replied. ‘Well, yes. Of course I can read Sinhala and write to my family.’

‘Do you have a return flight booked?’ he asked, tapping at the computer, to check.

‘No, and it was very expensive,’ she said, looking away. The snow had piled itself halfway up the terminal’s windows and she shivered, pulling the scarf tighter around her neck.

‘Look, it says here,’ he read out in a clear voice. “‘To Sajee. Can you come and work for us right away, 27th February. Good wages and apartment. Best regards, Hornafjörður Beauty.” I have to say the wording is very strange. Who sent you this message?’

‘Kristinn. The man who owns the salon,’ Sajee replied, twisting the ring on her index finger, a narrow gold rope. ‘Liu told her friend about me because she had a problem. Her relative in China is very ill and she had to leave. Liu asked me if I could take the job and I was so happy. Then this message came. There are four women working there so it will be good for me because I do the cleaning work alone and don’t know many people. And I don’t have to write anything because the man looks after all that kind of thing.’

‘Which man?’

‘Kristinn,’ she said with a sigh.

‘Höfn isn’t a big town, and I know pretty much everyone. You’re sure about all this?’

‘Yes. Read it yourself,’ she said curtly, irritated by his questions.

Sveinn looked through the messages again.

‘There’s a third message from the same number,’ he said, concentrating on the screen.

‘Yes,’ Sajee said eagerly. ‘The one that says Kristin who owns the salon will pick me up at the airport.’

‘That’s right, and with the date and time,’ Sveinn said. He put the phone down, crossed his arms and looked at her with concern. ‘Then there’s the same text again, exactly the same as in the other messages. I don’t want to be unpleasant,

but like I said, I know most people here and don't know anyone who runs a beauty salon. Could you have misunderstood?'

She quickly looked down at the tiled floor. The remnants of slush ice were melting there into a brown puddle. She was tired and out of sorts after the flight. On top of that, there was a nervous feeling building inside her.

'But what do I know?' he said quickly, hoping to lift her spirits, as Sveinn was the type who liked people around him to be happy. He was always ready to help and made every effort to find a solution to every problem. 'Do you think you could have got the name wrong?' he suggested. 'Could this salon be in Hafnarfjörður and not Hornafjörður? You wouldn't be the first traveller to get the place names mixed up. It can happen to anyone.' He leaned over the desk again and gave her a friendly smile. 'Look, Hafnarfjörður is a town near the capital.' He drew a circle in the air with his finger. 'Reykjavík's here,' he explained, his hand moving a little higher. 'Then there's Kópavogur,' he said as his hand moved a little further. 'Then there's Garðabær and then there's Hafnarfjörður. These places are right next to each other, easy to get them confused.'

'I know perfectly well where Hafnarfjörður is,' she said, unusually clearly and glaring at him. 'I live in Reykjavík.'

'Look, there are obvious mistakes in these short messages. That's why I thought it might have been wrong,' Sveinn said, unwilling to let the idea go. 'Have you tried to call the number?'

'Yes, of course. Many times, and I've tried to call Liu, but it's like her phone is turned off.'

'Then I think it's best if we give Adda Lía a call,' Sveinn said, turning back to the computer. 'She's the only beautician I know of around here.'

He punched numbers into the phone and offered it to her. She took it and after a moment's thought passed it back to him.

'Would you speak for me? Sometimes people don't understand me easily.'

'Of course,' he said and turned away. Sajee watched in agitation as he walked back and forth as he talked.

'Adda Lía doesn't know anything about this,' he said eventually. 'She works by herself and closes the place when she takes time off,' he said and stood for a moment in thought. 'To tell you the truth, I don't know what the best thing to do is. You're welcome to have a ride into town with me later. It's a bit of a distance,' he said, glancing at his watch. 'Between us we ought to be able to get to the bottom of this.'

He gave her a look that was supposed to be encouraging, but this time there was no laughter.

3

27th February

Höfn airport

She sat on the couch to wait, staring out at the snow, the empty car park and the distant mountain peaks. Worried and frightened, she closed her eyes and tried to push aside the uncomfortable feeling that she had been duped.

As a child she had frequently turned inwards to her own daydreams as an escape from a difficult and often painful reality. Her family lived in one of the many chaotic districts on the outskirts of Colombo. The house had never been properly rainproof, but provided shelter from the heat of the sun. Few of the streets lay in a straight line, instead snaking through the district like veins pulsing vigorously with blood, alive with noise, smells and life. Sajee was the youngest of three siblings and only six years old when her mother, who had suffered from epilepsy, died. Then her brother Janitha was thirteen and her sister Chamudi was twelve. A little while later their mother's sister Hirumi came into the household to care for them, but it wasn't long before she was gone. Sajee wept until her eyes were sore, but her father said it was for the best and that the evil eye followed their mother's family. Hirumi would visit occasionally when their father was away, but never stayed for long, and eventually she stopped coming at all.

One day a postcard arrived from Iceland, a country they had never heard of. Hirumi had met and married an Icelandic man, and now she worked cleaning houses in the capital, Reykjavík. Over the coming years more postcards with pictures of mountains and waterfalls arrived, and Sajee hung them over her bed. Janitha left home as soon as he was able, and when Sajee was ten years old, her sister Chamundi was married off to a middle-aged man in another district. That left Sajee alone with her father as he grew increasingly bitter at his lot and frequently vented his anger on her. She learned young that it was best to do as he wanted, and otherwise stay out of sight. She often spent as long as she could on the way home from school, playing with other children until she started spending time at Lakmal's shop, the popular massage and beauty salon. The women who worked for him were cheerful and talked endlessly. They treated Sajee kindly while she watched as if in a trance as their gentle hands massaged the tired feet of those who came into the shop. Before long she was running errands for Lakmal, who was pleasantly surprised at how quick she was to learn.

She quickly learned the techniques from the women and before long Lakmal asked her to join them. Her father was relieved, got rid of the shack they had lived in and moved in with his elder daughter while Sajee slept with the other women in a room above the salon. The next few years were the happiest of her life. She was respected and no longer needed to sweep the pavement outside or stand with a smile on her face to encourage customers to stop. Her foot

massages were popular, as she had the softest hands and knew how to use them, and she made a point of not chatting endlessly with her customers like some of the other women did.

One day there was no sign of Lakmal at opening time and the women wondered what to do. They waited outside for hours as customers came and went, without being able to do anything for them. Late in the day a stranger came, and gave them the news that Lakmal had suffered a heart attack. For the next few days they waited in hope and fear, and the salon stayed closed as he was the key holder.

They sacrificed and they prayed, but without success. On the seventh day Lakmal died and they all lost their jobs, and most of them became homeless. Sajee was devastated. She sent a desperate letter to her aunt Hirumi asking for help. For the next few weeks she was able to lodge with a charitable family, but nobody seemed to have any use for her skills. At dawn she would rise and go out, but there was no work to be found, as the patience of the family with its own mouths to feed began to wear thin. Before long she would have no choice but to join the beggars in the street, as she was reluctant to impose on her sister who already had her hands full with a brood of children and a father who became more difficult by the day.

Her hopes had faded when a thick envelope that had to be signed for arrived. An Icelandic family Hirumi knew were prepared to take Sajee in as an au pair. The letter contained money and precise instructions of what she needed to do, and a month later she left. The last few days had been difficult, but the journey to the airport was hardest of all. She sat rigidly in the bus. Her feelings almost overcame her as she left her own country behind, unsure if she would ever see it again. At the airport she needed all her energy to follow the instructions and go to the right place. She had never been on an aircraft before and now there were to be more than ten hours in the air to London. While she trembled with fright during takeoff, she managed to stay awake until a meal was put before her. Overcome by exhaustion and weeks of tension, she slept until a steward gently prodded her awake to offer her breakfast.

At the airport in London there were armed men everywhere so she tried to be unobtrusive. People hurried past, some of them jostling her on their way. When a young woman with a child in her arms stopped, Sajee plucked up the courage to speak to her and was relieved when she answered in the same language.

‘Can you tell me why there are so many soldiers here?’ Sajee asked.

‘Because of the terrorists,’ the woman replied. ‘There was a bomb in one of the underground trains. Many people died and many more were hurt.’

‘Is there a war here?’ she asked. ‘I don’t know much about Europe.’

‘Yes, the war on terror,’ the woman answered. ‘Be careful what you say and don’t leave anything lying around or you could find yourself in trouble.’

The woman’s words frightened her so much that she was consumed with nerves during the flight to Iceland. She was no less apprehensive about what might be

waiting for her in this new world ahead of her, but as she took her first steps she immediately felt a very different atmosphere to the tension of the airport in London. Hirumi was waiting for her and she had changed. She was plump, her hair brushing her shoulders, dressed in trousers and a fleece jacket. Crying and laughing, they fell into each other's arms. Sajee asked after her husband, but Hirumi told her to forget him – he was history.

For the first few days Sajee was sure that it was winter, as she was constantly cold, until she realised that this was summer in Iceland. It was also a shock to discover that she understood only a few letters of the new language. The streets seemed to be practically empty and she wondered where all the people were. She could see no animals. The silence was unsettling and the scarcity of people was terrifying.

Now she had largely adapted to the environment she had found herself in, and understood much although she spoke little. There were still things that she found strange, in particular how gloomy people were and how they complained about everything. She found it difficult to understand if this habit was something to do with the religion, or some other reason, while she was thankful that she had managed to tame her own restlessness and impatience. That had often served her well, not only after Lakmal's death, but also during the difficult times in Iceland. Once the family she had been with no longer needed her there had been a hard time, but Hirumi found her work cleaning people's homes. But that was not easy as so many people were cutting back on their spending following the financial crash.

After a while Iceland began to recover and there were households that needed her again. Of course she was sometimes unhappy and her thoughts would take her home to Sri Lanka. But in spite of the long spells of homesickness, she knew that there was little future for her there. At least in Iceland she had work and somewhere to live. To make an effort to do better, Sajee enrolled in a language course for foreigners, but lasted only a few weeks. The people in the group were varied and those with similar educational backgrounds kept to themselves. There was one woman from Sri Lanka who only appeared a couple of times and then never came again. Sajee missed having someone to talk to and tried to maintain contact with the woman, who was too occupied with her husband and children for friendship. It wasn't as if they had much in common other than being from the same country.

It wasn't just for this reason that she gave up on the language course, but also because the Icelandic letters were so confusing, angular and stiff, unlike the script she was familiar with. She didn't remember ever struggling to learn to read and write back in Sri Lanka, but here it had become a constant battle. The Icelandic she had picked up came from the children she had looked after, or from Hirumi, who had now departed for the longed-for trip home. Sajee was not even sure when, or even if, she would return as she had only sent one postcard describing a banquet she had held for the district's Buddhist monks, and telling

her that she had paid for repairs to a large shrine. Hirumi must be a respected person, she decided. One day she would also travel back to her old district, showing people how well she had done for herself in Iceland. The thought gave her a warm feeling inside and she opened her eyes.

Sveinn strode over to her and picked up the black suitcase.

‘Shall we be on our way?’ he asked cheerfully.

She looked at him in confusion for a moment as she gathered her wits. She stood up, zipped her coat up to her neck and went out into the cold.

Excerpt from chapter 7

The farmhouse stood on a hillock at the foot of a magnificent sheer-sided mountain. They took the turning off the main road and along the twisting track that lay in a long curve past the lagoon. The powerful jeep shuddered and its rear wheels slipped and slid in the snow, but Thormóður laughed. He seemed relieved to have reached their destination in one piece.

Sajee looked around curiously. An imposing boulder that had rolled down from the mountain lay in the scree, and looked as if it had fallen quite recently. A flock of birds wheeled high over the jagged peaks.

The house itself was a handsome one, two storeys and built on a basement. It looked as if it had never seen a coat of paint, standing clear of the white snow but almost blending in to the grey rocks of the screes.

As they approached, she could make out that the steel sheets of the roof were very new and the black window frames appeared to be newly painted. There were curtains made of a coarse, dark material that seemed to be in every window except for the basement, where the windows were blanked off with black plastic.

‘They could do with some colour about the place, the people who live here. Everything’s so grey,’ she muttered.

‘What did you say?’ he asked without looking. His concentration was focused on adjusting a small lever that seemed to be stiff. It finally gave way and the engine note altered. She shook her head and smiled politely.

‘Nothing. I didn’t say anything.’

To the west of the house was an impressive workshop where a small animal with a tail as long as its body rushed back and forth. It had clearly been tethered as it ran repeatedly the same distance in each direction.

‘What animal is that, the one tied up there?’ she asked.

‘Fox,’ Thormóður said shortly, without looking in the direction she pointed. Something else had caught his attention.

She decided not to ask more questions but watched the restless animal with interest. Further to the west, past the workshop, was a copse. Twisted trees stood within an iron fence, contrasting starkly with the bleak environment around them.

‘What garden is that over there?’ she asked, but this time there was no reply, as he stared at a green car parked by the house. It appeared to irritate him and he took out his phone to make a call.

‘Who the hell is nosing around and why didn’t you tell me?’ he demanded angrily, looking around as he spoke. The answer he got seemed to infuriate him still more, and he scowled. ‘No, it’s too late now,’ he growled, ending the call as he drove slowly along the eastern wall of the house. ‘Endless trouble with those people,’ he muttered to himself.

‘Is something wrong?’ Sajee asked, unsure of what was going on.

‘Nothing you need to worry about,’ he replied getting out of the car and going round it to open the back door. He lifted a couple of boxes and put them down by the door leading to the basement, and then took two full shopping bags from the back seat. A little bottle of nail polish remover fell out of one of the bags as he lifted it, and as he opened it to drop the bottle back in, Sajee got a glimpse of more inside.

‘So maybe you have a beauty salon after all?’ she joked, hoping to lighten the mood, but he either failed to hear or understand, and disappeared with the bags without a word.

A moment later and he was back, and asked for her phone so he could add his number to the list of contacts.

‘I’ve marked my number like this,’ he said, showing her the screen. ‘Just call me if you need anything.’

Now he seemed to be in a hurry to get away and lightly swung her heavy suitcase out of the car and dropped it by her side.

‘Tell Ísak and Selma that I’ve been shopping for them,’ he said, patted her shoulder and glanced at his watch. ‘I have to be going. You can never tell when the weather could turn.’

‘You aren’t going to come inside with me?’

‘No... You’ll be fine. I don’t want to see those people...’ he said and fell silent, nodding to indicate the green car. ‘I have to hurry, but don’t worry. I’ll come and see you,’ he said, and was gone, leaving her surprised at how suddenly he had been so anxious to leave that she hardly had time to say goodbye and to thank him for helping her.

She stood alone beside the house under the slopes. The mountains crowded around her. She looked up at the sharp points of the ring of rocky heights and

found herself mesmerised by the ragged clouds drifting around the peaks that protruded from them like the teeth of a saw.

‘Hello. You must be Sajee. Has Thormóður gone?’

Sajee was startled to hear a voice behind her.

‘Yes,’ she replied, her hand going instinctively to her mouth.

A portly older woman stood by her side. She wore trousers made from some fine material and a grey turtleneck beneath a woollen cardigan with silver buttons. Her complexion was smooth, although bags of skin had begun to form in the middle of each cheekbone and the skin beneath her chin hung like a chicken’s wattle. Her hair was as grey as ash, and she had dark eyebrows and deepset blue-grey eyes.

‘Were you born with a cleft palate, or did you have an accident?’ she asked, staring directly at Sajee.

‘I was born this way.’

‘Good,’ the woman said in a tone that was not unfriendly, holding her cardigan around herself in the cutting wind. ‘Even better.’

Sajee nodded politely, as if she had any idea of what the woman was talking about.

‘Come inside. You’re so poorly dressed that you’ll freeze if we stand out here any longer,’ the woman said, and shuffled away.