

Andrea hadn't realised that cockroaches could fly until a black beast alighted on the plastic chair beside her, casually folding its wings away out of sight. She did her best to ignore it, knowing her brothers would tease her mercilessly if she were to show the slightest fear. It was a relief when the cockroach made its way down the chair's metal leg and headed for Jóhannes, just as he bit deep into his burger. His powerful jaws worked hard as he tried to cope with a mouthful that was far too much, his thick lips parted to show the half-chewed food between his straight white teeth. Andrea grimaced, he teased her with a wink and an exaggerated sigh of enjoyment, and took an even bigger bite.

His younger brother, seventeen-year old Daði, was focused completely on his food, while their sweat-soaked parents made do with iced tea. It was June, and although it was winter here in Australia, it was hotter than midsummer could ever be back home in Iceland.

Andrea glanced down at the chair. It was back, the cockroach, long antennae outstretched. Its torso jerked and it set off. A few centimetres more and the thing would be on her leg. She stifled a yelp as she felt long, thin feet pass over her neck and onto her cheek. She slapped smartly and felt its body beneath her palm. She rolled something between her fingers and drowsily opened her eyes. It was a fly, an ordinary house fly, its thin wings caught in her fingers. Revolted, she wiped the remains under the seat and looked around in confusion, first at the towel hung over the rail of the balcony where she had been lying to hide her from the neighbours' eyes, then at the down-at-heel date palm in its terracotta pot and the little table with the summer flower she had just bought.

She sighed and ran a hand over her forehead, damp with sweat. The cockroach had plagued her for years, but recently its appearances in her nightmares had become rarer. The memory of the back thing reminded her of her late brother Jóhannes sitting in that white plastic chair as he munched a burger. The guilt pursued her like a bad dream. She hadn't missed him enough, and even, occasionally, had felt relief. He had been an ebullient personality, demanding and pushy, but sometimes capable of being such delightful company that any unpleasantness vanished like dew in the sunshine.

Andrea took long, slow breaths until her pulse settled. She felt for her phone under the sun lounger, keen to see if any likes had been added to her latest post. There turned out to be another twenty, which was better than nothing and served to sweep away the final vestiges of the nightmare. She got to her feet and went into the living room, looking around. Everything was sparkling clean and tidy, colours immaculately co-ordinated. She allowed herself a shadow of a smile, and avoided thinking about the bedroom, the grubby bedclothes and the junk on the floor. The cleaner had come on Friday, but was never allowed in there. Somehow her intention to deal with it herself seldom came to anything.

She went over to the fridge and opened it, took out the bottle of white wine and unscrewed the cap. She reached for a glass, filled it and took a mouthful, and then another. The feeling of wellbeing flowed through her veins and helped dispel the nightmare from her thoughts. Topping up her glass, she glanced at the clock. It was past midday on a sunny summer's afternoon. When the sun shone in Iceland it was as well to welcome it, and she wasn't expecting any visitors today, no more than any other day. On the few occasions she met friends, it would be at a coffee house.

Andrea wondered whether to take a taxi down to Nauthólsvík or downtown, but she didn't really have the energy for either. Her new

bikini was great, but she'd need to work on her tan or get a decent fake tan to really hit the summer vibe. The beach would be packed on a bright Sunday like this one and it wouldn't be easy to find a spot. If she were to go downtown, that would mean choosing an outfit and putting on make-up. That would take time, as she took care to never be leave home other than with with her hair and face perfect.

She checked her phone again. The responses to what she had posted yesterday weren't bad, better than they had been the previous day, but she still wasn't satisfied. She'd have to think fast and do something about this. Last night the nail of her index finger had been pulled of when she had been drunk and crazy, getting herself ready for bed, but her toenails were all right, they were absolutely fine.

Gazing out over the balcony, she saw the new table was great and the flowers looked lovely in the sunshine. A glass of champagne would perfect the scene. She emptied her glass in one long swallow, snatched up a cloth and bustled out. Once the table had been wiped clean she rubbed the latest tanning cream into her right instep and toes, then lightly powdered them.

There was an unopened case of champagne flutes in the bedroom. She felt they weren't anything special, but now they would come in useful, so she fetched one. She polished the tall glass and stood it next to the flowers before she opened a bottle and filled it. The tube of tanning cream was allowed to lie on the table as if dropped there without a thought.

It was a perfect tableau! She clapped her hands in childlike delight before she perched on the chair and swung the tanned foot up on to the table, where it fitted seamlessly into the picture. She snapped off one picture after another. She selected the best one, adroitly altered it, added a few words and posted it online. Satisfied with her day's work, she sipped the champagne then fetched more white wine. It wasn't

until she had drunk a toast to her herself that she remembered that she had used exactly this arrangement before.

‘Ah! I’m an idiot!’ she told herself, her glass landing so hard on the table that some of the contents spilled.

Her phone pinged to announce new messages, and she hurried to open them, and saw an image of a slim figure sitting on a bed, hunched forward. She had cropped brown hair, and delicate silver earrings. The woman took something from her cupped left hand and put it in her mouth. A heavy silver ring with a clearly defined motif could be seen on a finger of her right hand, and now Andrea could see that she was feeding herself tablets. They disappeared past her lips, one after another, and she reached for a glass. Water spilled down her chin as she drank and Andrea could see that she seemed to be struggling to swallow.

The horror of what she saw in front of her was such that she could hardly draw breath. She knew this woman who stared into her eyes as if through a fog.

‘You’ll have to wake up, he’s stop... ra...’ Kristín Kjarr said in a drowsy voice.

Andrea howled and threw the phone aside, just as the doorbell rang.

Guðgeir hesitated before putting a finger to the doorbell. He shuffled his feet on the heavy doormat while he waited for someone to come to the door, he tried to recall the names he had seen on the postboxes downstairs. It would probably have been better to go home to fetch a hammer, rather than disturb their new neighbours, he thought. But he pressed the bell again.

‘Hello, and sorry to disturb you. I was wondering if you might have a hammer I could borrow?’ he said as the door opened, cautiously and only half-way. Patterned straps stretched across the woman’s slim shoulders and tanned fingers held a grey towel across her chest. Good-looking, but a bit past her best, he thought. ‘I took my hammer home with me yesterday, you see. It’s happens when you’re moving house, backwards and forwards all the time with tools.’

He laughed apologetically, but she showed no reaction.

‘Look, it’s no problem. I was about to pack it in for the day anyway. There’s just one nail that needs to be knocked in properly. I can do it tonight or tomorrow instead.’

She inspected him suspiciously.

‘I was sunbathing,’ she said, her voice hoarse, and he could smell the booze on her breath.

‘Sure. Perfect weather for it. People shouldn’t be allowed to hide away indoors on days like this,’ he said cheerfully and made to be on his way. ‘Sorry to disturb you. I’ll sort it out somehow,’

‘You’re the one who’s moving in?’

She nodded towards the door of of the flat that would soon be home him him, Inga and Pétur Andri. Their daughter Ólöf had recently left home to move in with her boyfriend.

‘That’s right. I’m Guðgeir Fransson. We met in the garage the other day, didn’t we? We’re planning on moving in at the end of the month, so I’m busy fixing things up for the moment.’

‘My name’s Andrea and to tell you the truth, I don’t have much of a memory for faces,’ she said, patting down tousled dark hair. ‘Hold on. I’ll put some clothes on.’

The door banged shut in his face before he could say anything.

Should have gone just gone home and not bothered with this, he muttered to himself as he glanced around in impatience. A pot containing a large evergreen plant stood by the door. Its leaves were dusty and he stroked one of them. It was so odd to the touch that it was obvious this was a plant that would never require water. Was it acceptable to have this kind of junk in the corridor of a block of flats? He wasn’t sure. The door was opened, all the way this time, and Andrea appeared in a gown that looked to be some kind of Japanese kimono. The black shadows under her eyes had gone, and she had put on lipstick. She smiled wanly.

‘No offence, but I struggle with faces,’ she said. Her voice was low and not entirely clear. ‘Come inside. I’ll have to hunt around.’

Guðgeir followed her into an open area, what the estate agent had called a primary space when they had looked at their flat for the first time. He would have to get used to this and even though they hadn’t yet moved in, he was already starting to miss the cramped but cosy kitchen of their place in Fossvogur. He glanced around curiously. It was similar to their flat, but probably larger as he counted five doors leading off from the central area. The doors to the balcony stood open and he saw a sun lounger, a green chair and flowers on a table, along with a couple of glasses – one for champagne and one for white wine, and he realised why she had taken so long to answer the door, and so scantily dressed. This looked embarrassing. He had clearly called at

the wrong moment. There was probably someone keeping very quiet in the bedroom, waiting for him to be on his way.

‘You’ve made yourselves comfortable here,’ he said and coughed awkwardly.

‘I live here alone.’

‘Really? I though...’ He hesitated and glanced at the glasses on the table.

‘Oh, I see,’ she said, following his eyes. ‘That’s from yesterday. I had guests. A guest, I mean.’

‘Been here long?’

‘A year. From new. Endless trouble the first couple of months and you’re lucky to have missed that.’

She straightened her back and ran her fingers through her long hair.

‘It must have been exhausting,’ he agreed, looking around. There was no missing that the furnishing had been chosen with care and no expense had been spared. There were paintings on the walls, with other artworks ingeniously hung between them, with everything perfectly harmonised. The room had a high ceiling and there was a wide stretch of floor, in complete contrast to the cramped apartment he had rented for his year in Höfn. That year of his indefinite leave from the police had been spent working as a security guard. He and Inga had spent the best part of a year apart. It had been a difficult and lonely time for him, but now they were back together and he was back at his post with the police force. He was working on what were referred to as special assignments for the moment, but with any luck that would change before long. It had been more than a year since his return home and it had been fine so far, except for the sinister memories linked to their terraced house in Fossvogur. After talking things over, they had decided to pull up their roots and start again somewhere new. Their promised land was a newish apartment block fairly near the centre of Reykjavík, and the balance that had made its

way to their bank account made him even more confident that the future was bright.

‘What are you up to? Is there much that needs fixing in a new flat?’

Andrea opened a drawer and rooted through it. She pulled a stool and teetered for a second as she stood on it, opening one cupboard after another to inspect the contents.

‘Hang on while I have a quick look in the store room,’ she said stepping off the stool after a fruitless search. ‘I’m sure there’s a hammer there.’

She set off along the corridor, a little unsteadily.

‘We decided to take out a wall, and change the kitchen a bit... and put down a new parquet floor. Hey, let’s not worry about the hammer. It’ll be all right. I need to be on my way home, anyway.’

‘A shame they split up, the couple you bought the place from. They were only here a couple of months,’ she said and her voice faded as a door closed behind her and he wondered if she was really going to go barefoot to the store room in the basement.

Guðgeir sighed. Outside his work, he wasn’t used to being left alone in someone else’s apartment and it was an uncomfortable sensation. By the door he noticed some eye-catching hooks, more artwork than practical, with no clothes hung on them. A row of pictures in heavy frames stood on a shelf on one side wall. He felt in his pocket for his glasses and went closer to take a look. The largest picture was of a young and strikingly handsome young man. Dark-haired and with long lashes and heavy lips, his eyes for focused on the camera’s lens. A smile flickered across his lips and he radiated self-confidence. Guðgeir felt that the dreamy expression on his face made him look like a model. The next picture showed him five young women, cheerful, and with glasses raised. Andrea was one of them, well dressed and glamorous. She was also in the next frame along, which was clearly a family photo, with parents, two brothers and a

young Andrea, all in the best clothes. One of the two brothers was the handsome young man in the big picture.

‘I found a hammer,’ he heard her call out. ‘You can hold on to it until you’ve moved in, or for as long as you need it as far as I’m concerned. It turned out I have two hammers, which is really strange because I don’t remember buying a second one. One of those thickheads who was working here must have left it behind, because there’s still some of their stuff down there in the bike store.’

She handed him the hammer.

‘Builders?’ Guðgeir asked as he took it. ‘Did they leave tools behind?’

‘Yes, or some stuff, anyway,’ Andrea replied, the irritation clear in her voice. ‘I can’t stand them. They never keep a promise, and they’re just endlessly pushy the whole time.’ She was about to continue, and stopped herself with an apologetic look on her face. ‘You’re not a builder, are you?’

‘Me? No. I’m a police officer.’

He smiled and ran a hand over his chin. Her relief was obvious and he had found her embarrassment amusing.

‘Really?’ she asked with interest. Her eyes were clearer now. ‘What do you do? I mean, what sort of cases do you work on?’

‘Criminal investigation.’

‘What do you do there?’

‘I’m in charge of a department at the moment that handles some special investigations. It’s temporary,’ he added after a pause.

‘Do you look for missing people?’ she asked, wrapping her arms around her waist to keep the kimono tightly closed.

‘If there’s a suspicion that there’s a criminal element to the disappearance, then yes,’ he said, weighing the hammer in his hand. ‘I’d better go and make use of this, thanks.’

He opened the door and she followed him.

‘Don’t you close cases too quickly? I mean, if there’s no body, who decides to end a search?’ she asked in a tone of voice that he found alarming.

‘I remember a few cases of that kind over the years. It’s always a difficult decision to take, but there’s a point at which you have to say stop. That’s just the way it is.’

‘Maybe you remember my brother Jóhannes? He disappeared on 17<sup>th</sup> June 2000,’ she said earnestly. ‘He went camping with our brother Daði and their friend, Brynjar. The family hadn’t long come home from Australia, and the boys had brought the tent home with them...’

Andrea fell silent and stared at him accusingly, and he realised that she felt he wasn’t showing enough interest, but he had simply meant to borrow a hammer and finish what he had been doing. She sniffed sharply and looked at him with eyes that were beginning to fill with tears. There was a sense of desperation about this young woman.

‘If you walk along by the Sogið river, below the Thrastarlundur café, there’s a camping site there in the woods,’ she continued. ‘I don’t think it’s in use any more. Anyway, Jóhannes was on his own there and was going to get some sleep while the others went to buy food and take a look at the 17<sup>th</sup> June celebrations in Selfoss and Hveragerði. Then there was the big earthquake, and there was all kinds of chaos. It was a real quake, pulled roads apart and all sorts.’

‘Yes, I remember it well,’ Guðgeir said.

‘The boys were in Hveragerði when the earthquake hit and they tried to call Jóhannes, but couldn’t get through to him. They reckoned the phone system must have been overloaded, so that didn’t strike them as anything out of the ordinary,’ Andrea said, and drew a deep breath, as if she wanted to tell the story, but first meant to give Guðgeir an opportunity to escape. ‘The mobile network wasn’t as good as it is now,’ she explained. ‘The boys didn’t get back to Thrastarlundur until that evening, and there was nobody in the tent.

They decided Jóhannes must have gone for a walk, or something. Maybe to see if there was any earthquake damage, understand?’

She looked at him intently, absorbed in the story that Guðgeir was sure she must have told many times before. He glanced at his watch, hinting that he was in a hurry, but without wanting to be rude by rushing away.

‘It’s a long time ago now, but of course I remember that day,’ he said. ‘I was down at the harbour watching the displays with my daughter who was in a push chair then, just as the earthquake happened and the sea turned rough. The ships in the harbour were almost lifted out of the water. At first people didn’t realise what was happening, and everyone was terrified. It was worrying having a small child just as all that was happening. Wasn’t there another big quake right afterwards? I forget...’

‘But do you remember my brother’s disappearance?’ Andrea insisted.

‘I can’t say I do, but it rings a bell,’ Guðgeir replied, again weighing the hammer in one hand as an indicator that he needed to get back to work. This was a situation he occasionally found himself in, with people telling tales of circumstances their relatives had been caught up in. Normally it would be something trivial, and nothing to do with any of the work he did. He always tried to listen with interest, and sympathised with an old friend who was a doctor, who complained that he had to listen to endless tales of illnesses every time he was out and about. But Andrea’s tale seemed to be anything but trivial and he sympathised. He let the hammer hang from his fingers. It wouldn’t make much of a difference if he were to tap that nail in now or later.

‘The thought that he fallen into a crevasse or that he might have been by the river when the earthquake hit, and that he could have missed his footing and drowned. Come with me,’ she said, stepping

back into the living room. Guðgeir followed half-heartedly. Andrea plucked the picture of the handsome young man from the shelf.

‘That’s my brother Jóhannes. He had just turned twenty-one when he disappeared. The picture was taken in Australia about a week before we lost him.’

She handed Guðgeir the picture and he examined the handsome young man’s face a second time. This time it awakened some vague recollections.

‘It must have been a terrible shock,’ he said gently. ‘Was he found dead?’

‘No. No body was ever found. Neither hide nor hair of him. That was a completely crazy day, and then there was another quake two days later. That was a big one as well.’

‘That’s right. That’s the way it was,’ Guðgeir said. ‘Amazing how quickly you forget these things.’

‘But don’t you remember the case?’ she asked yet again, replacing the photograph of Jóhannes on the shelf.

He hesitated. 2000 was a year that had gone by in a blur. Inga had been struggling to finish her law degree while Ólöf had been two years old and had picked up one infection after another, and when she had been well, he and Inga had taken turns getting some sleep. What had stuck in his mind was debate over whether the start of the new century should be counted from 2000 or 2001, along with wild end-of-the-world theories, and the family had got together to buy a set of celebratory turn-of-the-century champagne glasses.

‘I think this is a better picture of him,’ Andrea said, taking the family group picture from the shelf. Guðgeir inspected it politely.

‘To be honest, I don’t recall this case,’ he said with an apologetic smile. ‘When you’ve had a career as long as I have then you can’t remember everything. As far as I remember, I had my summer holiday

that year in May and into June. I took longer than usual because my wife was finishing her dissertation at the time.'

He placed the hammer on a chair, held the picture in both hands and looked carefully at the two young men. They were very alike, both strikingly handsome, and Andrea noticed that his eyes lingered longer on one of them.

'That's Daði, my younger brother. I was talking about the older of the two, Jóhannes. The search was called off far too soon,' she said. 'He's often in my dreams... Well, not him exactly. But he doesn't let me forget about him. It happens pretty regularly,' Andrea said, as if this had become a burden.

'How old were you when he disappeared?'

'Twelve,' she replied, and her voice began to crack. She seemed about to cry, and he felt a pang of sympathy for her.

'Unfortunately it sometimes turns out that way, that the search is fruitless, and then sometimes nature gives up what it has taken, even somewhere far away. There are different ways of handling these cases. It depends on the circumstances and where it happens,' he said, handing her the picture and picking the hammer up again. 'I can imagine it must have been a horrific experience for your family,' he added and fell silent, knowing there was nothing more he could say.

All he could offer were empty words – but what did she expect of a stranger? His brother's disappearance was tragic, but this had happened nineteen years ago, so there had to be more than that troubling her. This was a problem with moving into a block of flats and being far too close to other people. What had he been thinking, knocking on a stranger's door to borrow a wretched hammer? People who lived in apartment blocks should say hello when their paths cross in the corridors, and otherwise encounter each other at most once a year at the annual residents' committee meeting.

‘Thanks for helping me out,’ he said, putting as much warmth as he could into his voice as he made for the door. ‘I promise I won’t keep hold of it for long.’

It was cell number ten. Nervous as he approached, Guðgeir felt his palms sweat and his mouth going dry.

‘You’re aware that other prisoners are locked down while you’re here,’ Svala said as she turned the key in the lock. ‘This is likely to cause unrest, so the sooner you finish your investigation, the better.’

‘Yes, of course,’ he said, and stepped aside to allow the doctor go first. Ísgerður was new to the job, but he had met her before, both at the old prison and at a crowded birthday celebration for a mutual friend. The soft brown hair that fell in a wave down her shoulders contrasted against her forbidding expression. Friendly enough on the surface, he thought, but distant.

‘Do you want us to wait outside?’ he asked in a low voice. He never spoke in a loud voice around death. All the same, his baritone echoed along the empty corridor.

‘That would be best. There’s not much room in there,’ Ísgerður replied gently. She took latex gloves from her bag and pulled them on. Then she slipped past the thick iron door.

The three of them were left standing in the cold corridor, Guðgeir from CID, Leifur from forensics and Svala the warder at the Hólmsheiði prison. A shaft of light from a narrow window shone on the glossy wall, and the numbers on the cell doors were noticeably large.

‘Poor Kristín. She was due to be released in a few days,’ Svala sighed gloomily. Her normally cheerful face was freckled, but today she could only look tired and sad.

‘Really?’ Guðgeir said, glancing at his colleague. Leifur raised an eyebrow.

‘As far as the staff here were aware, she was looking forward to being released. But sometimes there are things in life that can’t be figured out,’ she said. ‘Life never stops taking you by surprise.’

‘Maybe the idea of freedom was too much for her,’ Leifur suggested. ‘It wouldn’t be the first time.’

‘It was horrible to find her.’ Svala rubbed the tip of her nose and wiped away a tear that had strayed down her cheek. ‘It’s such a shame.’

‘What can you tell us about Kristín?’ Leifur asked, putting aside the leather case that was always at his side, wherever his work took him. There were clear dark shadows under his eyes and as he leaned against the wall his belly in its checked shirt sagged over his leather belt. His shirt buttons were under pressure, testing to the limit the thin white threads securing them.

‘Our director will meet us afterwards and will go over everything. Like I said, the family haven’t even been informed yet. But in a nutshell, Kristín was thirty-six and she had almost finished her six month sentence,’ Svala said. Her eyes brimmed with tears and her lip trembled.

‘What was she inside for?’ Guðgeir asked.

‘Driving under the influence and without a licence,’ Svala replied. ‘The car ended up in someone’s garden in Garðabær.’

‘So what? She flattened someone’s roses?’ Leifur muttered, more to himself than to those around him. Svala appeared not to appreciate the tasteless remark and glared at him.

‘There was a bit more to it than that, and Kristín was in hospital for a few days.’

‘I remember this one,’ Guðgeir said. ‘The car got stuck on a low wall and the bonnet went through a set of glass doors into someone’s bedroom... Someone was asleep in there? Isn’t that right?’

He glanced at Svala, who nodded.

‘There was a seriously ill elderly woman in there who fortunately wasn’t injured, but practically had a nervous breakdown. That was bad enough, but to make things worse Kristín had almost run over a child on a skateboard when she swerved over the wrong side of the road and over the pavement,’ Svala said, shaking her head and sighing. ‘These drugs just fuck people up totally.’

‘True,’ Leifur agreed and wiped his glistening forehead with the back of his hand. Guðgeir caught his eye. Leifur was pale and looked drained.

‘Feeling rough?’

‘Me? No, I’m fine,’ Leifur growled back. He didn’t appreciate personal questions, although he didn’t hesitate to ask them himself. ‘It’s really stuffy in here,’ he frowned at Svala. ‘Who’s been in the cell?’

‘I have, of course, and the director, Gauti. I had the night shift, and of course he should have been long gone home by then.’

‘Nobody else?’

‘No,’

‘Suicide note?’

‘We haven’t seen anything of that nature, but we didn’t touch anything and there could be something there with her pictures. Kristín sketched all the time...’ Her voice cracked and she looked enquiringly at Leifur, whose eyes were on the floor.

Guðgeir empathised with Svala. She was obviously distraught over what had happened on her watch.

‘Was she a serious addict?’ he asked mildly.

‘I’ve seen plenty worse,’ Svala said. ‘Kristín was frequently restless and nervous, but she was never difficult with the staff here, like so any of the others can be. She was often plagued with guilt over the child, as that could have been terrible.’

‘And how had she been recently?’ Guðgeir asked.

‘The staff were discussing just that while we were waiting for you. We felt that she had made real progress in coming to terms with her demons and she was more optimistic about the future than she had been,’ Svala said, fell silent and sniffed. ‘It’s such a tragedy,’ she muttered. ‘Kristín said she was feeling ill last night so it didn’t strike anyone as odd when she didn’t show up after unlocking this morning. I looked in on her when the others had gone, and as far as I could see she was asleep.’ She shivered, and coughed. ‘This kind of thing shouldn’t happen. I should have checked on her more carefully, but there was a lot to do and I was in a hurry, y’know... Summer holidays, and all that.’

‘Yes, fine,’ Guðgeir said quickly. He coughed loudly to hide how relieved he was. Svala looked at him in surprise.

‘Fine? What do you mean?’ she asked in surprise.

‘Nothing,’ he said, rubbing his cheek. ‘I was thinking of something else.’

He and Leifur exchanged glances. There was a tacit agreement between them not to mention that they had been given to understand that the woman had hanged herself. Either the messages that had reached them hadn’t been clear, or they had misunderstood. Cases like those were always difficult to cope with, but still weren’t the worst things they encountered. Guðgeir avoided letting his thoughts stray anywhere near the most shocking moments of his career.

‘Well,’ he said, his voice hoarse, feeling in his pocket for his glasses. ‘Is she going to be long in there?’

He peered past the half-open door and came away with an image of lifeless feet under a blanket and the waves of the doctor’s hair. She sensed he was there, and quickly looked around.

‘Give me a few more minutes,’ she said in a low voice, and with a faint smile.

‘Of course. No pressure,’ Guðgeir replied, hurriedly. That wasn’t true, as he and Leifur were anxious to get to work collecting evidence and dealing with statements. He folded his arms and leaned against the cold concrete wall. Time ticked past gradually. Leifur clearly wasn’t feeling his best, and Guðgeir would have preferred to have been working on his and Inga’s new apartment. They needed to get the move behind them, deal with their old place and hand it over to the new owners. The two police officers again caught each others’ eye and took out their phones. Practically simultaneously they were absorbed in messages, emails and news. Svala stared at the ceiling. A few minutes later the cell door opened and Ísgerður appeared.

‘There are no marks on the body and it seems that Kristín swallowed pills, wherever she got those from,’ she said, speaking to Svala rather than to the two policemen. ‘There’ll have to be a thorough check on the whole timetable of events, what medication she had been prescribed, visits, and all her interactions in here.’

‘It’s been a struggle to contain the drug problem, as you know,’ Svala sighed. ‘Some prisoners are unbelievably crafty. As soon as we close off one smuggling route, they find a new one.’

‘Was Kristín an active user?’ Ísgerður asked.

‘She tested negative when she arrived here and generally she seemed to be in better shape than most of our arrivals,’ replied Svala, who seemed to be becoming more downcast by the minute. ‘Do you think she overdosed?’

‘That’s what it looks like at first glance, yes,’ the doctor said. ‘Intentionally, or not. Had she been depressed?’

‘The length of her sentence hit her hard, considering how harsh it was for a first offence. But she had been cheerful recently,’ Svala said. There was a note of doubt in her voice and she shook her head slowly as she spoke.

‘All the same, that can be a precursor to suicide. There’s a certain relief that comes with having taken the decision, even anticipation.’

‘Kristín was laughing and joking here the other day. I couldn’t help noticing how happy and buoyant she was.’

‘Well, that’s the way it is,’ Ísgerður said, awkwardly patting Svala’s shoulder. ‘I’ll request a post-mortem, although that could take a while.’

‘What’s that? There’s a waiting list for autopsies?’ Asked Leifur, who had hardly spoken so far. But he wasn’t the type to let pass an opportunity to disparage the healthcare system. ‘Do we have to wait for months on end to have our organs pulled out? Ridiculous!’

His bushy eyebrows lifted and he scowled in disgust.

‘It looks fairly straightforward, so there’s no urgency,’ Ísgerður replied, with restraint. ‘Not unless you want me to make a priority of what looks like a prisoner’s suicide? Is that fair on everyone else?’ She calmly caught his eye, and it was obvious that this was far from the first time she had explained why the system worked at its own pace. ‘It’s always tragic when someone takes their own life but we also have to recognise that this isn’t something we can prevent happening occasionally. Prison’s aren’t the happiest places, even when they are as new and smart as this one,’ she said, emphasising her words with a wave of one hand.

Guðgeir could feel his own impatience grow inside him. There was plenty that could be done, he thought to himself, if only people could learn to work together instead of each in their own corner.

‘Without being able to be certain of the facts of this case, I can say that trepidation over what life has in store on the outside can often be too much, unfortunately,’ Ísgerður continued, as if she were conducting a lecture. She buttoned a lightweight jacket and smiled encouragingly at Svala, who stared back stonily.

‘Time of death?’ Guðgeir asked quickly, pushing his glasses up his nose with the tip of one finger. The new frames weren’t sitting right, but Inga had liked them so much that he had bought them without a second thought.

‘Not more than four to six hours, I would say,’ the doctor said, hoisting her bag onto one shoulder.

‘I’ll be in touch,’ Guðgeir said, shaking her hand.

Ísgerður turned and walked fast along the corridor. Her thin jacket billowed like a sail and her heels clicked on the floor. As she closed the door behind her, he pushed open the cell door.