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The man sitting next to her had a friendly face. He was fair-haired, his beard bushy but neat, and he 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 started ten minutes after takeoff. The aircraft juddered at first, and then lurched as it lost height. Sajee snatched at the man's hand and hot coffee spilled over him.

'I'm so sorry,' she said, letting go of his hand and transferring her grip to the seat's steel arm rest. He took a serviette from the pocket of the seat 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,' he said with a mild, beautiful smile. He was a handsome man, but there wasn't much expression to be seen. 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 gulped.

'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 against it,' he said sympathetically.

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

Each shovelful dispatched more snow as it formed a white wall alongside the steps leading up to the olive-green, two-storey house on Höfn's main street. Guðgeir Fransson, former Reykjavík police chief inspector, had rented the ground floor, an apartment that was big enough for a single person, although the low ceiling could sometimes make a tall man feel as if the walls were closing in. The place was halfway to

being a cellar, but Guðgeir counted himself fortunate to have got the place, as the growing flow of tourists had resulted in a shortage of housing in Höfn.

The previous summer had seen records broken as more tourists than ever before had turned up and even more were predicted for the next summer. So everyone who had an opportunity to rent out a room to tourists was busily doing just that. All the same, not many had turned up so far. The winter had been a hard one and spring was still a long way off.

That February morning it had turned unusually warm, so the snow was wet and heavy, and clearing it had become heavier work than usual. He worked as hard as he could, as if he were determined to set a speed record for clearing snow. His mental state always felt better for physical exertion. Since making the move to this quiet coastal town a day's drive from Reykjavík, he had made an effort to get daily exercise. He swam, walked a lot and ran when the weather allowed it. His aim was to fall into an exhausted sleep every night. If he wasn't able to fall asleep quickly, thoughts of his old life and the pain of missing it would keep him awake far into the night and he would imagine the person he loved asleep at his side, while he craved the warmth of her body beside him.

Sajee had little experience of travelling by air – or travelling at all. This was only the second time she had been anywhere. Before that had been the long journey, 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 Höfn's 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.

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. The 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 deep tubs 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 stuck, come to me,' he said in a low voice. 'My name's Thormóður.'

'Thank you,' Sajee said and backed away. She was sure there had to be a bad smell about her. There was vomit on her sweater and on the many-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 while 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.

Höfn was a place where heavy snow was nothing unusual, but this winter had been exceptional. It had begun to fall early in the autumn, just a few weeks after Guðgeir had been taken on by a small security company after many miserable months of searching for work. There were only two staff who took alternate shifts, and their paths almost never crossed. Guðgeir wasn't sure that the fledgling company would even stay afloat to the end of the year, but so far wages had been paid on time. The family had been left behind in Reykjavík, in the terraced house in Fossvogur.

He would have preferred to have sold the place after the horror that had taken place there when his colleague and old friend Andrés had become the victim of the killer they had been tracking, but Guðgeir's wife Inga hadn't been prepared to let the place go – at least, not while things between them were so uncertain.

She told him that it was just a house and there were no memories stored in the concrete walls around them, while people had feelings and they were the ones who needed to make sense of their own emotions in the aftermath of what had happened.

For weeks he had kept to the shadows, hiding away in a room he rented out of town, and returned

home when the worst of the storm had abated. They had tried to pick up where they had left off, to act as if nothing had happened, as if there had been no betrayal – the first and only time he had been unfaithful to Inga. A second's lapse of judgement had triggered a series of horrific events, with the end of all this still not in sight.

The pain was too sharp for them to be able to talk to each other and their home life turned into a poor imitation of what it had once been. The harsh note of accusation was never far away, in both Inga's voice and that of the two youngsters as Guðgeir was constantly wracked with guilt. An atmosphere of brooding silence had replaced the positive closeness of the family home. When there had been an offer of a job in Höfn, Inga had made it plain that he should take it. They could examine their feelings again at the end of the one-year contract. Guðgeir felt that a year was too long a time and tried to convince her, but she wouldn't be swayed.

Now he could see that Inga had been right to hang on to the house. It made sense to wait with the big decisions until they had reached some sort of balance once more. Their existence had been in turmoil; over a short time everything had changed and lives had been lost. Sometimes he wondered if the Höfn weather was some kind of a symbol of the turbulence in his own life, as it could rarely be predicted and often turned wild. There had hardly been a full week without a blind blizzard descending, and several times avalanches had blocked the Hvalnesskriður

road to the east. In between the falls of heavy snow there had been days when the temperature lifted and things began to thaw. Then there was every chance of a downpour of rain before it froze again. The streets were so slippery with ice that getting from one house to the next could be a challenge.

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It was too cold to wait outside in the February darkness so she sat on a sofa upholstered in fake black leather. Surely the man would be here soon to collect her? A burly 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 Höfn, 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.

Respect p... '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, 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. 'I've lived here for a few years.'

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 local beauty salon,' Sajee said, repeating the words 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 letting their attention wander. 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, looking up at her.

'Yes, I'm starting work there,' Sajee assured him. 'I'll be doing pedicures, massages and that kind of